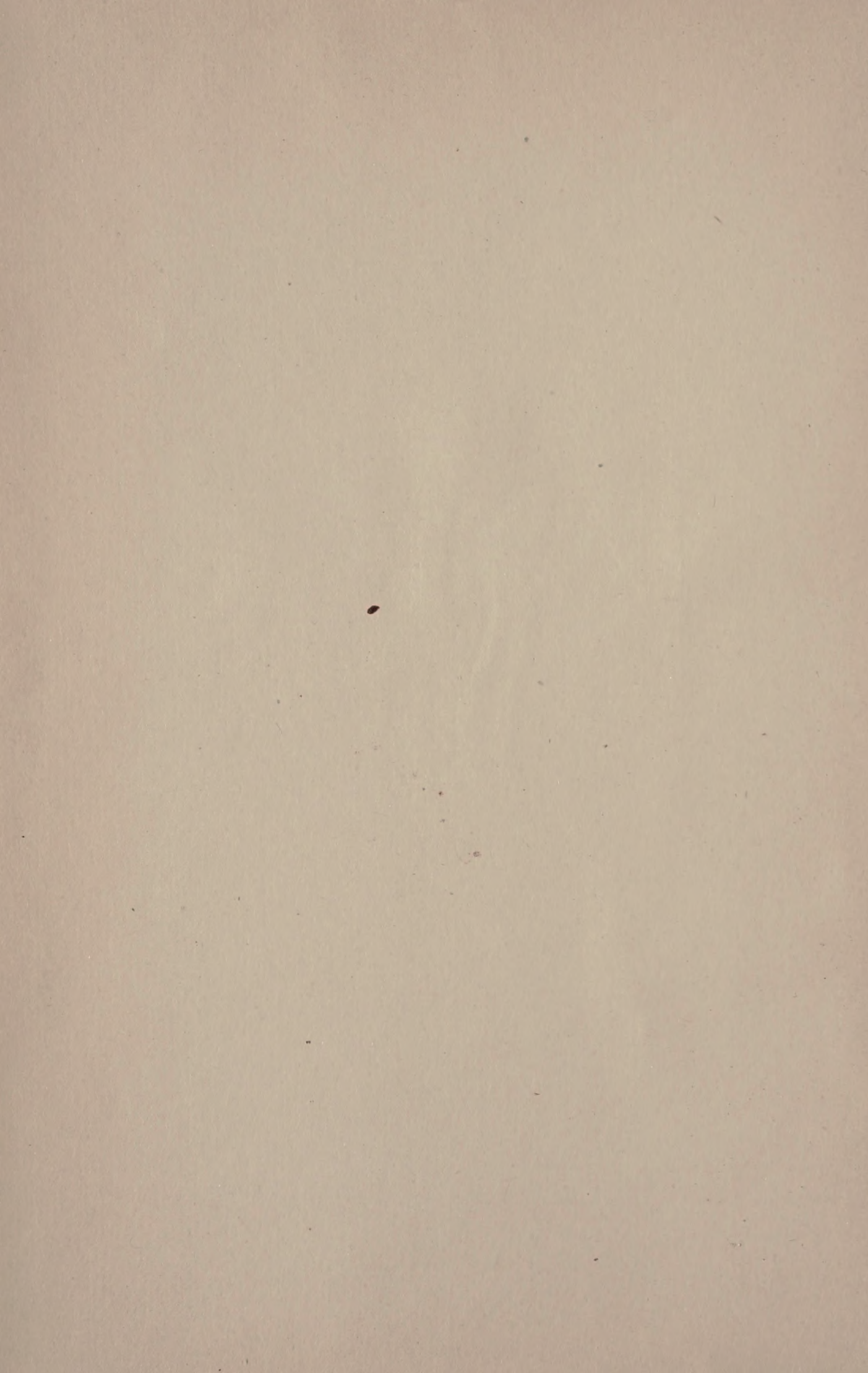


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THE CHARM BROKEN.

• BY •

LEON DE TINSEAU.

No. 52.



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“Listen,” cried he, clasping her in his arms. “Perhaps we can still be happy.” Page 92.

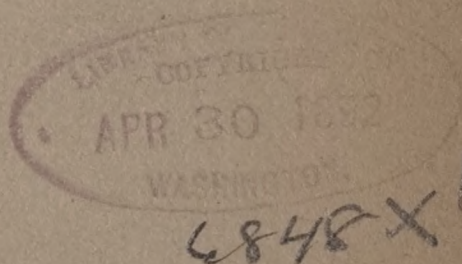
THE CHARM BROKEN.

FROM THE FRENCH OF
LÉON DE TINSEAU.

TRANSLATED BY
HETTIE E. MILLER.

CHICAGO:
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THE CHARM BROKEN.

I.

Paul de Chérancy ascended the staircase very hastily, a staircase of the clumsy order, not one of those bright with gas, gilding and mirrors, without which the people of modern Paris can no longer be satisfied for the benefit of their visitors or themselves. So much the worse for you if your staircase is not of the proper kind. What should be chiefly considered is the first impression, so think our architects. The world, thank God, will not end without having seen those eternal copyists invent something at last: the elegance of staircases.

On the second floor Paul paused and, raising his hat, examined himself by the light of the large lantern. Our sex is more vain than the opposite sex supposes.

Chérancy, although still young, was not, however, in the first bloom of youth; it was as if the varnish had disappeared from the furniture. But, without doubt, there was a special reason for taking such care of his appearance at that hour.

Undoubtedly he was about to call upon a lady whom he desired to please; men of worth,—and Chérancy seemed to be one,—believe that such a matter requires painstaking and that it is worth the trouble.

Masculine pictures are tiresome if they are not drawn by the hand of a master. I, therefore, will confine myself to saying that my hero, without being taller, more handsome than a great many others had nothing which could prevent him from pleasing if he wished to. Perhaps a very youthful fiancée would have thought his manner for a man, of thirty years of age, too grave, but a mature woman would have fallen in love with his beautiful, intelligent, faithful eyes. So you see it was not a fiancée.

Nine o'clock chimed. Paul opened his coat, satisfied himself that the snow on the sidewalk which he had just crossed had left no spot on his boots, and, without calling in his eyes to aid his hand, he found the ivory button hidden beneath the folds of the sombre drapery.

It was not, certainly, the first time nor even the second that Chérancy had rung at that door.

It opened almost immediately. Without asking the usual question the visitor entered the ante-chamber where the skillful hands of a maid, dressed in black, with a respectful manner, relieved him of his furs. As he murmured a "Thank you," accompanied by a slight inclination of his head, an inside door was opened in front of him, and he found himself in Nadia Fresnel's small drawing-room.

Once in the room, the grave expression on his face melted into a smile of extreme youth. His face glowed, his eyes sparkled, and it was almost with boyish activity that he kneeled upon a cushion lying there as if by chance, the hypocrite! A hand, very

white, rather plump, well cared for, without any hypocrisy, met half way the lips which sought it. Then followed a long kiss upon that hand, a kiss passionately tender and yet respectful.

"When they told me that it was snowing so heavily," began Mme. Fresnel, "I thought you would not come. I had already made up my mind to sacrifice my evening."

"Indeed!" said Paul, looking at the hand which he still held in his, as if he were gazing at it for the first time. "Did you ever know inclement weather to detain me?"

"No, indeed! But, for four years—four years, Paul!—we have not had such a winter. You have journeyed to the North Pole, my friend."

Her visitor was no longer on his knees. By his youthful movement he had made it difficult to leave gracefully a posture which he could not, under penalty of appearing absurd, maintain very long. Seated sideways on the cushion, his arms resting on Nadia's easy-chair, he replied:

"What did you say about the North Pole? It is quite the contrary! At this moment I feel the rapture of a Laplander who has suddenly fallen among the rose-bays of an Indian princess. Only think, I spent the afternoon in my studio, which was cold in spite of the blazing fire. I saw none but tiresome people; sensible ones do not go out in such weather. And by a lash of the whip, that is to say, by a shower of lashes on the back of a poor horse, here I am in your *bonbonnière*, where it smells so fragrant, where

it is warm, where I find intelligence, affection, refinement, charm *you* in short! You, Nadia, whom I love more and more in proportion as the days pass by. Dearest, do you remember the time when you would not believe that I should always love you? Do you believe it now?"

"I dare not; I am too superstitious. Not to doubt one's happiness is to remove all sorrow. Time breaks the firmest bonds, separates those who think they can never part. And I, Paul, I have no other tie than my affection by which to hold you. I lose sight of you for hours at a time. Your life, the greater part of it, is spent away from me!"

It might have seemed, at the first glance, that Nadia Fresnel was an ordinary woman, if the woman capable of retaining for four years the passionate love of a man must not necessarily be the least ordinary of her sex.

She was certainly not possessed of that wondrous beauty which causes mortals to fall upon their knees, nor of that, more desirable perhaps, which makes them fall in love as into a snare decked with flowers. It could not be said that she was very young for she was almost thirty.

Fair, with gray eyes, the color of which did not remain the same for an hour at a time, she had too dead a skin for a blonde; but an exquisite mouth, and lips of cherry ripeness contrasted with that somewhat cold *ensemble*, in the manner of a tropical flower transplanted by chance beneath a Northern sky. She had inherited from her mother, a Russian,

her wealth of pale golden hair, her blue-gray eyes, her odd name and the fantastic side of an unequally balanced disposition. From Baron de Montsuzain, her father, she had inherited the pure blood, the excellent health, the generous and just spirit of an ancient Southern family. When she was not twelve years old—her mother was already dead—her father said of her: “That child renders me as uneasy as a hot morning and a cloudy sky. I hope my future son-in-law will not be afraid of thunder.”

What he should have hoped, before all, with regard to that unknown, who later on appeared in the seductive form of young Maxime Fresnel, a dandy of Bordeaux, would have been that he should fear the scorn of respectable people, and even certain rigid articles of the Code. Poor Nadia had only too much occasion to make use of her “thunder” and also to shed copious floods of bitter tears. The first four years of her marriage were one long and cruel succession of all the disenchantments which can reach the heart and pride of a wife. Fortunately for her, Bordeaux had the advantage of being the port for a line of steamers to South America.

On a certain evening a passenger boarded the “*Patagonia*,” and at once sought his cabin in order to protect him from the cold, the enemy of delicate lungs. At about the same hour, Mme. Fresnel, to whom Maxime had not taken time to bid adieu, almost fainted with fear and shame on receiving a visit from two mysterious men, who came from a

place equally mysterious. They lost valuable time, or rather they gained it, searching the house from cellar to garret. The Fresnel family had influential connections, and the police did not wish to find the person they were apparently in search of. The "*Patagonia*" could steam down the river without any hindrance. Never since, have we heard the handsome Maxime spoken of, except in connection with a very grave circumstance of which we shall speak in time.

The first step that Nadia took, for she soon understood, as did everyone else, her lord and master's sudden departure, was to obtain her separation. The second was to settle in Paris without any fortune, except her modest dowry; for she would not allow her lawyer, the celebrated Lucien Sireuil, to ask for a sou for her. The absence of issue, too, simplified all. Even after having received her divorce, they could not persuade her to profit by it in order to resume her maiden name.

"To whom would it give pleasure?" she asked, "not to the last of the Montsuzains certainly, — they would not care to be reminded of the *mésalliance* of one of their line, a *mésalliance* well punished! With regard to myself as a Catholic, divorce is practically naught. As a refined woman, it is repugnant to me. I would rather have my gown spotted than dyed. At the time that this story opens, Maxime Fresnel had been gone seven years, and it was almost six since Nadia, fleeing from the memories of Bordeaux, had settled herself in her tiny

apartments on Boulevard Saint Germain, which, everything included, did not cost her a thousand crowns a year. Rarely did a divorced woman plan her life in so praiseworthy a fashion. Served without luxury, but with irreproachable correctness, by two devoted maids, she enjoyed in her home a comfort very often unknown to women twenty times as wealthy.

As for her relations with the world, they betrayed none of the mystery of a woman who felt it incumbent upon her to hide herself, but the somewhat disdainful reserve of a person with a taste difficult to please.

With the exception of a few distant relatives, scattered about in several old mansions, who saw the young woman often enough to show that they did not side against her, Nadia only possessed one relative with whom she held any intercourse, and she was a relative and a friend at one time ; for she found in Claire de Chalonne, her first cousin, all that one could look for in the most faithful of friends and the most affectionate of relatives.

Unfortunately for Nadia, that affection could only be poured out through the medium of letters. Very happily, very well married, the mother of a charming little girl, one of the most popular ladies in her part of the country, Countess de Chalonne only came to Paris once a year, in the spring, and then but for a few weeks. In the autumn Mme. Fresnel returned her visit, and that was all. The remainder of the time they corresponded.

On reaching Paris, Nadia had vowed to "see no one," a vow which all women in her situation make—I mean the best of them. In time, rendered less rigid by many hours of ennui and sadness, she broke her vow. She opened her door to two or three ladies whom she thought amusing and above reproach. On her side she had entered a few salons which were opened to receive her. Soon the poor, lonely woman became aware that it was necessary to stop. Here, there was not sufficient amusement; there, there was too much.

Nadia, out of all the places open to her, chose only one salon in which she appeared but rarely, and one friend whose house she never entered, but who was to be seen frequently at hers. The salon was that of the wife of General Sauteyron, one of those which seemed the least suitable for Mme. Fresnel. The friend was the wife of the architect, Lavissiere, a person quite wealthy and not without talent. In point of men, with the exception of Paul de Chérancy, only one came to see her regularly: I speak of Lucien Sireuil, the old lawyer, formerly her counsellor, now her friend, and whose intellect she valued as did all Paris.

Poor Nadia! you will say. Socrates himself with so few friends could have thought himself very greatly to be pitied.

Agreed; but Nadia was no philosopher. She was a woman, a loving and tenderly-loved woman. Never, since she had known Paul de Chérancy, had the chambers of her heart seemed too large.

II.

This was how they became acquainted.

Four years before, Paul, returning from the Pyrenees, towards the middle of autumn, tarried longer than was prudent in the refreshment-room at Bordeaux. Suddenly he was informed that the train was about to start, carrying with it his luggage, his valise, his robes and even his hat, left upon the seat as a sign that it was occupied.

Threatened with one of those catastrophes, the most vexatious which can overtake a traveler, Chérancy cleared the room at one bound. He leaped over a wall of empty wagons; avoided, with the audacity of a toreador, the attack of an engine in motion; knocked a man down, and clung to a coach gliding past him, all in about twenty seconds.

He opened the door of the compartment, tripped over a heap of skirts, and fell into, rather than seated himself, in the only vacant corner. Then he set about examining his three companions, who were all women.

“My God!” he exclaimed, with an accent of terror which was not feigned; “am I in the ladies’ coach?”

Two of the occupants, a mother and daughter, reassured him at the same time by two words pronounced with that air of good nature so common to English women when they travel without the fatiguing society of their husbands:

“Oh, no!”

The third said nothing; indeed, one might almost have thought that she had not perceived the entrance of the man. Her head thrust out of the window, her eyes turned in the direction of the platform, she threw timid little kisses to an invisible being. Soon, the train having left the station, she resumed her seat, and buried her veiled face several times in a superb bouquet of roses.

Chérancy thought her quite insignificant.

She wore a dust-cloak of yellowish silk trimmed with maroon ribbons, and her gloves were of the same common color. In addition to that, they scarcely had the number of buttons by which one's style is judged of. Indeed, even without having Paul's eyes—that is to say, the eyes of a painter renowned for his taste—we might have said that the roses in the lady's bouquet were worth more than the roses in her hat, which was very unbecoming to her.

"I am," thought the traveler, "like a bird fallen from its nest; not a newspaper, not a book, and, above all, not a cigar. But what could I do with a cigar here? It is fortunate that at Libourne I shall regain all my rights as a free man."

To while away those forty minutes he studied his neighbor opposite him.

"Why, she is crying now! Who the deuce is she leaving? A husband? A husband would have come to the door, and besides, a husband does not give such fine flowers. If I were to say: 'Ah, Madame, I am depriving myself of smoking in your presence

—will you not return my politeness? Who has told you that I do not fear the odor of love?’ Plague take the whiner! Here I am in the dark until to-morrow.”

It must here be told that Chérancy had been traveling in the mountains in order to escape his disappointment at a piece of feminine treachery which happened sooner than he had anticipated. His wound was healed, for it was not very deep. But the pain past, the void remained. No one to whom to give roses. No one from whom he was grieved to part. None of those partings which rend the heart, at which one assists hidden in a corner, twirling one’s moustache without seeming to know her who is departing. He too, once upon a time, had received kisses which reached their destination invisibly, tears which flowed mysteriously, tears which distressed but which produced such a feeling of happiness and of pride! He too had loved!

At that moment Paul made the following discovery, which discouraged him very much and made him ill-natured: it was that to an ideal and affectionate nature the absence of love is harder to bear than all the sufferings caused by love.

It was worth the pain of having passed that crisis, to feel oneself affected by a longing, a regret, at the sight of a tear falling from the eyes of a stranger! Then he appealed to his good sense, to his rancor so illy-appeased, to the experience he had with women.

“What did *he* find attractive in her? Pretty

she is not, nor stylish; nor is she interesting, still less vicious. She has a kind heart. Parbleu! they have all kind hearts—for a while. Were I to take the trouble, Madame, you would be untrue in your glances three times in half an hour."

As he had nothing better to do, he took that trouble, but it was lost time. The train was running along the banks of the Gironde.

Already the steeples of Bordeaux and the masts of the port were enshrouded in the distance in purple mist. Several sailing vessels drifting with the tide seemed like barks beside a monstrous trans-Atlantic steamer.

It was upon that colossus that the eyes of the stranger were riveted, eyes filled with tears, and Paul would have been surprised could he have divined the memories called up in his neighbor's mind at the sight of that steamer on her way to sea.

By an abrupt movement, the express turned from the river into an unpoetical country. Then, with a deep sigh, without observing that she had a *vis-a-vis*, the lady dried her tears, bade farewell to her sorrow or to her dream, and prepared to go to sleep.

Oh, sudden metamorphosis! When she had taken off the ugly hat which concealed her lovely, fair hair, when she had thrown over that wealth of gold a black lace scarf knotted coquettishly beneath her chin, that woman appeared young, stylish, pretty. Our great-grandfather would have described her by the single word "*touching*."

Chérancy did not take his eyes from her, and, for the moment, regretted his cigar-case less than his pencil and his sketch-book.

It was quite another thing when she stretched herself upon the cushions after having—at last!—thanked with a glance and two words uttered in a singularly sweet voice the obliging neighbor who relieved her of a heavy valise. She laid down without any prudery, with a movement of perfect harmony, revealing an almost feline suppleness. The painter was charmed that she should instinctively have taken the most graceful pose, precisely the one he would have chosen for her; her profile somewhat turned away, her arms encircling the bouquet of roses. And soon after, like a child, weary and yet comforted by its tears, she fell asleep, her lips parted in a half smile. But those rosy lips, mature, enticing, were not like those of a child. Motionless in his corner, like a spectator who occupies a good seat at the theatre, Paul no longer wondered what there was so seductive in that little woman. He enjoyed her as an artist and as a man as well. The train was, however, slackening speed in order to stop at Libourne. Chérancy, who knew English, heard Miss Three Stars say to her mother: "I hope that gentleman will return to his coach now." By not returning, he would appear like a simpleton cherishing ridiculous hopes of adventure. And yet he was inclined to remain there. What should he do? He weighed the difficult problem, pretending to be asleep. For very little he would have snored, the dastard! All

men, in the presence of a woman who interests them, become more or less weak, ridiculous and small. Reader, you who have known the pleasures of those sweet yet cowardly actions, my hero awaits the first stone from you!

It was the middle of the night. The two English women, in postures rigidly severe, stoically braved the inconveniences of all sorts resulting from the vicinity of a male companion.

Each time that the train stopped Paul had the pleasure of hearing himself condemned to the infernal gods, in the language of Shakespeare. But he was less inclined than ever to leave the place from which he could admire the ideal effect of a ray of moonlight, bathing the upper portion of the young lady's form; strange sight, accompanied by that fever of insomnia which exaggerates impressions, and by the excitement of nerves lashed by a rapid ride. At certain movements, he fancied he saw the pure brow, the golden bands of hair, the eyes of a lovely saint asleep on a Gothic window. Again, with a tinge of purple upon her smiling lips, she seemed like an amorous Diana, feigning sleep, in order to relieve a timid Endymion of all fear. Thus the tedious hours passed. Frequently the sleeper awoke and found Paul always on the *qui vive*, ready, before she could speak of it, to raise the window, to shade the lamp, to throw a shawl over her tiny feet, chilled by the night air. She replied by a simple "Thank you," and to hear a single word uttered by that soft, musical voice, Chérancy would have

thrown the two English women out of the coupe. At Brietigny day broke. The lady awoke, put her bouquet in order, noticed that a red rose, the prettiest of all, was gone, and glanced at the floor. On seeing Paul's eagerness to aid her in her search, she divined whither the rose had vanished, and immediately her face, already reserved, became statue-like. Paul, thoroughly aroused, besides being chilled by the morning air, without a hat, without the shadow of a brush, absolutely certain of having been absurd and of being looked upon in that light, was angry with every one, himself to begin with. Moreover, the lady with the roses had donned her hat and was no longer pretty. The "Midsummer Night's Dream" terminated with a cold in the head!

During the night Paul had planned a thousand clever detective-maneuvres to be employed on his arrival. He carried none of them into execution, and, leaping from the coach when the train stopped, he rushed to the compartment which he had entered the preceding day at Pierre-fitte. In short, he took leave, by a mere bow, of the *young saint* and of the *Diana* whom he had devoured with his eyes for three hours.

But as it was necessary that his ill-nature should fall upon some one, he said to Miss Three-Stars, in the most irreproachable English :

"Pardon the inconvenience my presence caused you—your humble servant, Mademoiselle."

Having reached his apartments on rue de l'Arcade, Paul retired, slept until eleven o'clock, took a bath,

and while his breakfast was being prepared, he began to assort the things he drew from his pockets. A red rose, which he had not gathered, recalled to his memory his adventure of the preceding night.

“Parbleu!” thought he, tapping his brow, “I will keep the subject for one of my canvases for the Salon next year!”

III.

Autumn passed, and winter as well. On the first of May the doors of the Salon opened, according to their custom, and the two pictures by Chérancy were among the most conspicuous.

One represented a hunting scene, his favorite subject. The other, noticed in the catalogue under the title, *In the coach*, was one of those paintings of the kind the most popular that year. The painter had confined himself to what he had seen,—or thought he had seen. After having rendered from memory, as well as he could, the charming posture, the features, the ambiguous expression of the sleeping traveler, and that moonlight effect which had charmed him so much, Paul amused himself by completing the details with rigorous exactness. Nothing was lacking in the decoration of the coach, in the costume so faithfully reproduced, even the bouquet lying upon the lady’s lap, and the red rose,



Like a child, weary and yet comforted by its tears, she fell asleep
her lips parted in a half smile. Page 15.

making a dash of color upon the carpet, were not forgotten.

"It would be comical," thought the painter, "if she should see my painting and recognize her picture. Parbleu! I am curious to know what she would do."

She did nothing, and yet it could not be said that she had not seen the picture. Not only had the work attracted all Paris by its true, modern amusing note, but all the newspapers, even in the smallest boroughs of France, as well, had described it.

Paul had received offers from several people, but he did not hasten to reply. His work pleased him, and he thought of keeping it for himself. But he was sure he could dispose of it if he wished to. The other canvas, of less value, was already sold at a good price.

One day, near the close of the Salon, Chérancy received by post a letter worded thus:

The Countess de Chalonne would be obliged to M. Paul de Chérancy if he would name the price for his canvas exhibited under the name of * * *.

(Hotel Veuillemont.)

"She has taken her time," thought the artist, much amused by the adventure. "A countess! Well, I doubt it! In these days the ladies of the aristocracy can be distinguished from the middle class by their simplicity. As for selling her my picture, no indeed! I will not take the money from that country-woman, for such she must be, since she is stopping at an hotel. However, I will see her,

and if she be a woman with a keen sense of humor, the meeting will be a comical one."

On dining at his club, Chérancy posted himself. "The Chalonnès," said a friend to him, "are people of position. They live in a castle near 'Grave d'Ambares.' The marquis must be very old. As for the Count, he was seen often in Paris before his marriage. Since then, he has buried himself in his estates. He is an enthusiastic vine-grower and very rich besides. They say that his wife is very pretty."

"Not so pretty," replied Paul, "but very graceful."

"Do you know her, then?"

Chérancy opened his mouth to say that all Paris knew her from a certain canvas in the Salon. But he would have been obliged to relate the episode which had given rise to that absurd interpretation. He stopped short, spoke of other things, and, the clock pointing to 2, he left the club for rue Boissy-d'Anglas. His siege was prepared when he mounted the staircase; that is to say, he had planned in advance a speech, light and spiritual, with a dash of gallantry and of malice—a scene from Marivaux, modernized by Feuillet.

An unforeseen circumstance caused the play to end after the rising of the curtain. Paul was ushered, on presenting his visiting-card, into the presence of a tall, dark, handsome woman, with an imposing air, who, at that moment, was drawing on her gloves preparatory to going out. Her costume was very becoming, but it tempered the effect of her beauty

more than it accentuated it. A pretty girl of about seven, carrying, as one would a halberd, her mother's parasol, looked proudly at the advancing stranger. That body-guard was worthy of a queen, and the whole picture breathed an exquisite grace; but Chérancy was not thinking of the picture before his eyes, nor of the other which he had come to sell. He only saw one thing—that his unknown had been changed.

With a preoccupied air, he said:

"Pardon, Madame . . . Countess de Chalonne?"

The strange brunette for half-a-moment appeared very much amused; then she resumed her dignified air and replied:

"Yes, sir."

The little girl seemed struck with amazement at the sight of that Iroquois who did not know the Countess of Chalonne.

"Sir," said the mother, pointing to a seat, "you are too kind to have put yourself out to come here. Two sentences will suffice: your canvas is charming, and I hope it is mine."

"My God! Madame, it is not for sale," replied Paul, very much disappointed at affording those amusement upon whom he had counted to amuse him.

"Was it to tell me this that you came here?" exclaimed the Countess, glancing almost angrily at Chérancy.

Paul, accepting the challenge, did not lack a reply.

"I came to see the person who did me the honor to write to me."

“And now that you have seen her?”

“Now that I have seen her, I feel doubly sorry that I can not gratify her request.”

By the fire which sparkled in his interlocutor's eyes, Paul saw that she was not accustomed to being opposed. The little girl, crimson with indignation, seemed only to await the sign from her mother to lay the audacious man at her feet. Already Mme. de Chalonne was routed, leaving Paul master of the field of battle. It is at that moment, usually, that we begin to yield, when the enemy is a woman.

“Madame,” said Chérancy, “deign to listen to me. Suppose that chance had thrown us together to travel in the same coach an entire night and that you had slept from one end of the journey to the other: Suppose, too, and the matter is not improbable, that I had conceived a very pleasing subject,—mine must seem so to you since you wish to buy it; suppose, finally, that the picture was drawn from a resemblance such as I could remember, but perhaps somewhat incorrect: would you like to see it fall into the hands of a stranger?”

No; but I should not like any better to see it remain in a painter's studio among a thousand more or less common studies.”

“On coming hither, I thought, I will confess, to find myself in the presence of my model, or rather, of my inspirer. In that case my reply could not be doubted.” Clarie de Chalonne seemed suddenly appeased. She reflected a moment, then she said:

“You speak like a man of delicacy, sir. Will you believe me if I tell you that your picture, bought by me, will pass directly into the hands of your ‘inspirer,’ as you call her?”

“I can not call her anything else since I do not know her name. Tell her, then, that the painting shall be hers.”

“Thank you, sir. There now remains to settle.”

“The price? No! An amateur-artist, such as I have the misfortune to be, has no right to accept money for his pictures. I hope for no other payment than the pleasure of seeing once more a graceful lady to whom I owe, after all, an apology for having caused her to pose unknown to herself. You may tell her that, madam. She has, no doubt, her reasons for not appearing before me. I respect them whatever they may be; but your friend might have, I assure you, been able to count upon the discretion of an honorable man.”

He thought of the kisses confided to the breezes, of those roses bathed in tears, and told himself that probably the traveler of the past Autumn dreaded meeting their involuntary witness.

The bell rang, and Mme. de Chalonne seemed suddenly confused, to such a degree that the color rushed to her cheeks. Then, submitting to the only thing to be done, she said to her child:

“Open the door, Marthe.”

Almost immediately could be heard exclamations of joy, the sound of kisses, and the child reappeared,

skipping merrily about the room and crying :

“Aunt Nadia! Aunt Nadia!”

Aunt Nadia, who proved to be Paul’s mysterious traveling companion, entered. Since the day of the private view, her mind had been filled, more than she would have liked to confess, with thoughts of the painting by Chérancy.

At her cousin’s advice she had, a week before, commissioned her to negotiate with the artist, in order that she need not appear.

She was very anxious to possess the canvas ; but she wanted no romance, and Claire de Chalonne, her guardian angel, wanted it still less than she did. The purloiner of roses—for she knew the entire story—did not favorably impress the latter.

Nadia would have been very much surprised and probably very much disappointed, had she been told that the rose was not laid carefully away in the bottom of a box, that the painter had not kissed it as he brushed the canvas. With regard to the latter, the two cousins had come to the decision that it was an ingenious artifice by means of which to discover Nadia. In their hearts, they could not help admiring that ruse.

With all that, the enemy was in the camp ; but it must be confessed that he had not the air of a victor ready to commence the pillage.

He looked at Nadia, not with belligerent intent, merely to see if he had caught the resemblance, and was pleased to find that he had been successful. Beneath that glance, Nadia shuddered ? As for Claire,

a calmer observer, she was reassured, in which she made a mistake: for Paul de Chérancy began to recall his traveling companion with all her captivating grace. And, if this time the mind was less affected, the heart was more so.

The conversation began. Countess de Chalonne was certainly not very tactful. Wishing to close the door on romance, she opened the window. Thanks to her, Paul learned the history of the bouquet. The roses had been gathered by Claire herself, and it was to her, for she had accompanied her cousin to the station, that Nadia's tears and kisses were directed.

Therefore the coast was clear, or at least might be, and Chérancy received that intelligence with a pleasure which surprised himself.

As was only right, the artist made a disdainful gesture when the financial question was broached.

"I only ask one favor," said he. "I have my artist's vanity and I should like my work to present a perfect likeness. Will Madame take the trouble to come once or twice to my studio, that I may retouch it from nature?"

What reply could be made to so just a demand? Madame Fresnel, accompanied by Claire, posed twice. Marthe, who had become a great friend of Paul's since he had conducted himself so well, chaperoned her mother and aunt.

The result was that Mme. de Chalonne took away with her a charming sketch of her daughter, made in two hours.

At length the Countess and Marthe returned to La Prée. The artist asked and was accorded permission to deliver his picture himself . . .

Four years thereafter, as we have seen at the commencement of this story, the delivery had not been finally made.

IV.

For the prolongation of conjugal happiness is requisite a combination difficult to fancy, of virtues, of self-denial, of reciprocal expediences and even of exterior chances. To render a social *liaison*, I will not say enjoyable for a long time, but possible, there is required a number of conditions usually very rare.

The vaults of the Pantheon would suffice to the end of time for the burial of husbands gifted enough to keep until the end their faithful wives, at the same time making them happy; who have discovered how to make saints without producing martyrs. But what of the wonderful man who, for a long period of life, kept in a cage with one hundred doors those delicate birds whom lawful bars wound so easily and imprison so illy! That man must have possessed at one and the same time genius, prudence, seduction, poetry, experience, constant control over himself, unbounded devotion. He must have been a Richelieu, a Don Juan, a Balzac, a Musset, a Plato and a Vendredi. Oh! the rare, valuable man!

Probably Chérancy did not possess absolutely all those qualities, but he had a certain number, principally the most useful in such a case, that is to say, the negative qualities.

He was no longer young enough to scorch himself at one of those brilliant flames which are short-lived. He was no longer innocent enough to incur the risk of breaking his idol by placing it on a pedestal lost in the clouds.

He was not vain enough to compromise his happiness by talking of it; he was too well treated by life to have become hardened; his happiness here below had not been perfect enough to render him selfish. He had no relatives to depend upon him, nor even a godmother to wish to marry him off. He had only a limited number of friends, not much wealth, some ambition. His art was not to him an absorbing passion nor an obligatory livelihood. He rarely set his foot in a newspaper office and had never read Schopenhauer.

There is, you will say, a character which the author does not flatter. Patience! The time will come when you will accuse me of portraying to you an improbable hero. Such is, indeed, the reproach one risks in attempting to relate true stories.

In the main, Chérancy's *liaison* with Mme. Fresnel was born of a misunderstanding.

The former had desired nothing but to produce a picture of a novel kind, for which Fate had provided him with the idea. The latter, her fancy swayed by the solitary dreams of her life, formed,

from that painting in the Salon, a romance of respectful and delicate passion, that ideal of refined feminine hearts.

“He loves me. He has watched me sleep an entire night. He has stolen a rose from me. With that, not a word, not an indiscreet attempt to follow me and to find out who I am. A painting made from memory—how he remembered the smallest details!—proves to me that he thinks of me.”

Thus, the artist had unconsciously woven a romance. From the first day Nadia vowed that the picture should find a place in her house, but without the author's knowledge. It seemed to her as if that romantic sketch would lose its charm if the mystery were to vanish; but, as we have seen, the precaution taken to remain the unknown of the carriage had turned out a failure. Thrown together on ground so well prepared, they thought themselves suited one for the other. The isolation of their lives, a strong feeling of sympathy drew them together.

Soon Nadia was no longer mistaken in believing herself loved. Soon she loved.

They gave themselves to one another, as they thought, for life. Not only their lips confessed it, which is the usual custom, but their hearts avowed it with all their fervor, without mad precipitations; on the contrary, with grave meditation. Under the influence of their bliss, those two companions felt as if departing for a lengthy voyage. Thus they allowed the fragile vessel which carried their commingled lives to float along. And, when, the last

cable cut, Nadia re-opened her eyes to see the shore flee forever, she could not restrain this cry, the first avowed of the anxiety from which she could not free herself :

“ Oh, God ! If Claire knew.”

They recognized, I think, in all its fullness, the happiness which arises from what is called in the world an *unknown liaison*. The world accepts no others. If it accepts them, you will say, it is because it does not know of them ; but how can it accept them if it does not know of them ? That is one of those numerous mysteries which the world offers to the meditation of skeptics.

In reality, the world is not often unaware of them, but, on this occasion, the ignorance was complete,—at the price of what sacrifices !

Paul and Nadia alone could tell ; sacrifices so hard to make, that I know few people who would desire a happiness so dearly bought. Four years to hide their love, they had to resort to the same ruses which an Indian tribe employs to hide its camp in the immense forest strewn with ambushes. For four years, Chérancy only visited Mme. Fresnel at hours agreed upon beforehand, when he was certain to find her alone. And, on the rare occasions when she rejoined a small circle, he abstained from appearing, having found out from the experience of others, in similar cases, with what ease the slightest incident betrays certain mysteries. Never had they been seen walking alone, or in public places. Concerts, theatres were closed to them, and that depri-

vation was one of the hardest to bear. But that which, above all, caused Nadia pain, for she was of a jealous nature, was that she could not follow the man she loved into the world. Not only did they not seek occasions on which to meet in society, but, invited to the same place, one of the two refused. At times, in the summer, in some village without the border, they met with the air of malefactors tracked by the police.

Thanks to their rare prudence, the couple had succeeded in deceiving the world. But Nadia would not have cared to pass for an angel of purity in the eyes of the entire world if she could have, by any means, concealed her fault from her cousin. After having envied her as the happiest of women, she feared her, at that time, as the embodiment of unswerving fidelity. From childhood, although Claire was the younger, she had gained a strange ascendancy over the little orphaned Nadia, who had become her companion by adoption. And, in the excesses of anger which sometimes possessed her, Nadia often had been calmed by that menace of Claire's:

"You know! I will not love you anymore!"

When Mme. Fresnel, a few months after the commencement of her *liaison*, saw the time for Claire's annual visit approach, she felt the fear of a dishonest cashier on the eve of detection.

"Do you wish," said she to Paul, "to know the surest proof of my attachment for you? I should feel almost comforted to hear that my cousin could not come."

“Why? You are not, so far as I know, obliged to choose between us.”

“I pray to God that the choice may never be imposed upon me! Without you, I should die of grief. Without her, I should die of shame. Ah, dear! may she find nothing out; that would end all!”

The Countess de Chalonne arrived. Her cousin went, as was her custom, to meet her at the station. Those were the same kisses, the same passionate tenderness, apparently. Claire did not divine that she was no longer the preferred one. But one thing did not escape her:

“My God,” she exclaimed; “how handsome you have grown!”

Happily, the Countess was not suspicious. If she had asked the cause of that improvement, she would have embarrassed poor Nadia very much, for she had never been able to tell an untruth. Paul, instructed, had no longer permission to come to the house. That Mme. Fresnel should visit him never occurred to either of them. He began to curse the country, its residents and their visits to the capital. Fortunately, he knew how to write and so did Nadia. Twice a day they told each other of their trials, recounting the smallest details of their lives, telling one another of what they thought, of what they did and also, alas! of what they did not do.

But soon the quarantine was raised, and by her in honor of whom it had been established. Mme. de Chalonne could not see the famous picture, “*In the Coach*,” without inquiring about the artist. And, as

Nadia, who after all had made some progress in the art of dissimulating, returned a cold reply and spoke indifferently of several visits she had received from Paul, her severe cousin continued:

"I am pleased to hear that he leaves you in peace, although he has not the appearance of a flirt. It is first for that reason that I like him. And then in him are combined two qualities between which generally one has to choose—the case of a man of the world and the picturesqueness of an artist. I should be charmed to see him. Will he not come here once during my stay?"

"I do not think so; at least not unless we invite him," said Mme. Fresnel, who that time spoke the truth.

Several days later a formal note, due to the collaboration of the two cousins, who had weighed every word of it, informed Paul of the presence in Paris of Countess de Chalonne, and of the pleasure it would afford her to see him, a pleasure shared by Mme. Fresnel. Conclusion: An invitation to spend the evening with the latter in three days' time.

A private note of eight pages, covered with confidential instructions, accompanied that invitation.

It concluded thus: "Be with me at three o'clock; you will find me alone and we can spend twenty-five minutes together. At no price would I have a tete-a-tete between you and her. She has too often spoken of 'my painter' in the past two days. And if she should ask you for her portrait, refuse absolutely. Moreover, you promised never to paint an-

other woman from nature. A model so seductive is the very last I could allow you."

The twenty-five minutes at Boulevard Saint Germain would be entirely consecrated to recommendations of prudence. The next morning Paul received a long letter again. The last sentence contained this threat:

"If she should suspect anything, you will not see me any more."

And farther on, this postscript betrayed a feverish hand:

"But do not try to put her on the wrong scent by paying her court; all would be ended between us."

Notwithstanding his worldly habits, Paul saw the time arrive with terror when he was to go to Mme. Fresnel's. From the real Scylla and Charybdis, he would have been able to preserve a reasonable distance. But in a *salon* fifteen feet square, he should have to work between two women without exciting the suspicions of the one and the jealousy of the other.

Fortunately, that evening Lucien Sireuil dined at Boulevard Saint Germain, thus with the two cousins forming a trio. At first, the conversation was very merry. After dinner it gradually took a more serious turn, when the subject of a suit of which all Paris was still talking, and which Sireuil had won, was discussed.

"What a pity," said Claire, "that talent such as yours—pardon my frankness—should be so idly employed. In aiding certain women to leave a false

position, you, in a measure, encourage them to adopt it."

"Dear Madame," replied Sireuil, "you would speak differently were you to hear what I repeat seventy times to my clients before pleading their cases: 'Suffer yourselves to be deceived.' I say to them; 'Suffer yourselves to be bored, suffer yourselves to be beaten, but never separate. Once separated, you will no longer have the excuse of vengeance. And if you behave in a proper manner, no one will believe in your virtue.'"

"Well reasoned," said the Countess. "Does it have the effect of persuading them sometimes?"

"Never. When a woman has crossed a lawyer's threshold, all is finished. She thinks she has breathed free air, has crossed the Rubicon of independence. Do you know what alone would stop her, if she has any pride? A probation in the world of separated people. A woman is always a woman. She does everything gracefully, prettily, neatly. But there are the men!"

"Ah, yes," sighed Nadia. "It is curious to observe the contempt expressed by the most refined when they speak of a divorced woman. Why that blot on the customs of a society which has for its motto, *"All for woman?"*

"Softly," corrected Sireuil. "*All for woman . . . and for man!*" The Salic Franks, our forefathers, have bequeathed to us contempt of a lone woman. In the height of the age of chivalry, we did not want them for queens. To-day we vol-

untarily insult them on the streets. We only accord them one privilege, that of dwelling in a coach ornamented with a placard ! It is absurd, and I'll wager that neither of you, ladies, would enter one."

"That is true," said Claire. "It would seem to me that I was traveling fourth-class. But, in spite of all, dear sir, I think you too peremptory. For, in certain cases, we know separation is a woman's duty."

"Certainly," replied the lawyer, gravely. "Once in the course of my career I have been able to say to my client: 'It is necessary for you to separate.' And I remained her respectful and sincere friend."

He kissed Nadia's hand and resumed, in the midst of an affecting silence :

"Would you like to know what there is so terrible about a separation, unless the victim has a great name, a large fortune, grand connections ? For them the situation is very different. Even irreproachable as she may be, the separated woman must choose between two alternatives: the life of a recluse, or the role of a dog without a master."

"Enough!" said Nadia, with tears in her eyes. "When I indulge in those thoughts, I am seized with a desire to enter a convent."

"Ah, indeed !" replied Sireuil, who was not at all devout. "I defy you, dear friend, to find a single convent where they would undertake to cut off that superb hair, as long as your husband has not given up his soul to God. Instead of retiring into a con-

vent, seek refuge behind the affection of your friends."

At that moment, as if he had heard those words, Paul de Chérancy entered. He arrived in time to create diversion, and Sireuil, who knew him, hastened to furnish him with an opportunity to enliven an audience which had need of it. Paul, agreeably surprised to find the coast free from danger, easily fulfilled a role which was not beyond his powers, for he was intelligent.

Mme. de Chalonne was pleased with him, and, without being aware of it, gradually monopolized him. He had been sent for for her.

For four years Chérancy had made many sacrifices, but rarely had one so difficult been demanded of him as that he should not reply to the sympathy of a beautiful, well-informed woman who spoke to him of his art, praised his talent and who enjoyed the artistic conversation of an accomplished Parisian.

Nadia, frowning moodily, conversed absently with Sireuil, who strove to interest her.

Eleven o'clock chimed. The two men rose. Paul seemed enchanted with his evening. An annihilating glance showed him that he was too much pleased. Claire assured him that she would be delighted to see him again.

"H'm!" thought he; "I think I have put her on the wrong scent too strongly. Look out for a storm to-morrow."

Another, however, was to see the storm burst.

Left alone with her cousin, Nadia, without a word,

approached the mantel-piece and, with nervous fingers, re-arranged the bric-a-brac upon it. Then, as Claire was preparing to return to her sleeping child, she detained her, made her seat herself, fell upon her knees before her, and, forgetting everything but her jealousy, the strongest of all the passions, of all the feelings of a woman, she spoke thus:

"Claire, listen to me! You are happy; you should be good. You have all that mortal could desire; a child, who alone suffices for a life's happiness; a husband of whom you can be proud and who loves you devotedly; the life of a queen in the midst of people who respect you, in a delightful country. I have nothing. A man who is a good judge just said that I was a poor dog without a master."

"For pity's sake, be calm," said Claire, throwing her arms around her cousin's neck. "You are ungrateful. Have you not a sister?"

"Let me speak," continued Nadia. "Listen. A kind, tender, generous man has reconciled me to the future. I love him as if there were only he and I upon this earth. It is the first love of my life; it will be the last. He is my support, my stay, the rock to which I cling. As wise as a father, as devoted as you are, as tender as I should never have thought a man could be. . . . Ah, were I to lose him now, I should soon die!"

"Nadia!"

"You may be disgusted, surprised. Do you think I have not been so a hundred times? Do you know that I wrote to that man yesterday, referring to

you: 'If *she* should discover our secret, I should not see you again!' How was it that you did not divine it? You did not look at me after *he* entered. But now that I have seen you together, I say to you a quite different thing: leave me, scorn me, go; never return; tell my weakness to all the earth! . . . But do not make Paul love you!"

"Nadia, you forget yourself!"

"I forget everything; I am mad; I abuse you both. But I am so unhappy! For an hour I watched you. I saw his eyes admire you, his artist's eyes which found beauty in you. His face lighted up at your words. His voice trembled when he addressed you. Oh! why did you want him this evening?"

With those words, Nadia burst into tears and buried her face in her cousin's lap.

The latter caressed her tenderly without replying. In a moment she said:

"Poor darling! You are just as of yore with those wild outbursts. But the little Clairon of former days has not changed either. She loves you with the same tenderness. Be reasonable, my dear, my beloved sister. I will never voluntarily cause you pain; I would rather suffer a thousand torments. Moreover, you know very well, dear simpleton, that only one man exists for me. Rise, do not weep any more. You shall never hear a harsh word from my lips."

"Yes, but what will you think?"

"I should not do differently if I had suffered as you have. That is what I think. Kiss me."

With a bound Mme. Fresnel rushed into the arms held out to her. She no longer wept.

In her heart, her severe friend thought her too easily consoled as she heard her sigh:

"Ah! if you knew how I loved him!"

"Chut!" said the Countess. "I have promised not to judge you, but not that I would not absolve you. I will be your confessor with the blessed forgiveness and eternal silence; but not your confidant. We both forgot ourselves; I know nothing; you have told me nothing. And now, if you wish all to remain as it was between us, you will give me a promise."

"To part from him? Never!" exclaimed the impetuous woman, starting up with dilated nostrils.

"No," said Claire, almost in a whisper, with an expression of deep sadness. "Not to part from him, for I could no longer esteem you if—if I had to listen to another confession."

Nadia was silent. To those words, in which there was so much truth, what could she have replied? After a short pause, she asked:

"What promise do you wish?"

"This: On our friendship, swear to let him think that I know nothing. You would not wish to make me blush for you if I should meet him again."

"You are right. I should no longer be worthy to be your sister were I to speak! Now, adieu! Let me weep alone!"

Claire de Chalonne was the purest of women. But she would not have been a woman if, reviewing in her mind the passionate confession she had just heard, she had not thought of the penitent a little less than of the cause of the trespass.

When her carriage left her at Hotel Veuillemont, she had resolved to do everything in her power to avoid another meeting with Chérancy for the sake of Nadia's peace of mind.

"It is a pity!" thought she. "He would have been a charming friend. And what will he think if he sees that I avoid him? What shall I do?"

Matters, alas, were arranged only too easily.

Scarcely had she entered the house when Claire received from the hands of her maid a dispatch calling her to La Prée, where her husband had just been stricken with a sudden illness. She left the following day; fifteen days later she was a widow.

V.

Nadia kept her promise, and Paul remained ignorant of the scene which had taken place between the two women.

Would she have kept the secret as well—the only one she had from him—if fresh occasion had arisen to put her jealousy to the test? It is doubtful. For two years deep mourning detained the Countess at La Prée with her daughter and her father and

mother-in-law, who were crushed by the loss of their only son, the last of their race.

It seemed, too, as if Mme. Fresnel had sworn not to mention her cousin's name, and Chérancy wisely guessed that that silence was due to rancor or to the precaution of a jealous nature. Perhaps he was right up to a certain point; but, in reality, Nadia could not think of Countess de Chalonne, white and pure beneath her widow's cap, without experiencing a sort of shame. The severe words uttered by Claire on a certain evening resounded in her ears in the happiest moments of her life. Her first impetuosity calmed, she could not forgive herself for having been so frank.

A few months after the death of M. de Chalonne, she wrote to the young widow who had congratulated her upon being happy in comparison with her own sadness.

"Happy, did you say? Alas! There are tombs so thickly covered with flowers,—you know it, poor friend!—which one passes near without suspecting that which the dark earth hides. Vain illusion! If a cold wind should blow on a winter's morning, beneath the mantle of fallen leaves, the hillock reveals its dark form. If you knew how that icy air often passes over my heart, how often I am reminded of that which is dead in my life: self-esteem!"

That life certainly did not lack flowers, thanks to the tender devotion of Chérancy, whose only fault was too great a weakness for the beloved woman. He treated her as a delicate being, as a sick child,

spoiling her at the moment of her attacks, a dangerous thing! We have seen children pretend to be sick in order to obtain sugar.

As for him, I think he was, with the exception of those alternatives, as happy as a man could be. He had over his beloved the advantage of being occupied. The hours which did not belong to her belonged to art. He was progressing, his reputation was growing, and his pictures, always sold, materially increased his income.

As long as Mme. Fresnel was the "good Nadia," as she called herself, Paul recognized the ideal of the happiness expected of a woman.

Gentle, devoted, intelligent, pleased to sacrifice all the joys of life to the joy of loving. By terms smiling and impassioned, she accomplished the wonder of being "several in one" which engenders constancy.

On certain days the wind suddenly changed.

Then the "bad Nadia," suspicious, jealous, undeceived, doubting all, dissatisfied with her fate, seeking change and excitement, desiring all that she had not, appeared. When Chérancy heard her praise domestic joys or speak with enthusiasm of the verdant solitude of the woods, of the majesty of the ocean, of the snowy mountain peaks, he knew what was coming.

"Alas!" he cried, discouraged, "I resemble those gardeners who cultivate the most beautiful flowers in the world at the foot of Vesuvius. At the moment that the perfume is the most intoxicating, the

breeze the most gentle, a dull sound makes them fear a shower of ashes for the morrow."

Then, gloomily, thrown back upon herself, Nadia replied :

"Very well, unhappy gardener, seek a more equable climate. Leave this miserable spot!"

In her rebellious hours Nadia felt the desire to do those things "forbidden" by Paul: to summon her "friend" Mme. Lavissière, who turned her head by her silly and unwholesome tittle-tattle, or else to pay a visit to the *salon* of the "General's wife," in order to seek diversion there.

The "General's wife," as she was called in the coterie of which she formed the centre, was a widow, had not been divorced, but, as she expressed herself with the military freedom which she had inherited from the defunct: "It was ripening! The day before the one on which Philibert was taken ill, I had my first conference with my lawyer. Three months more and I should have entered the brotherhood. Alas! the poor fellow did not give me time!"

The "poor fellow," if evil tongues could be credited, had found time to enter another "brotherhood." According to the story, apoplexy, which came so opportunely, was caused by the excitement of a vexatious discovery. But, as the affair dated from the days of the second empire, the legend was enshrouded in the vague uncertainty of prehistoric times. One fact was certain: the flagrant offence. Contemporaries themselves no longer remembered if Philibert died of grief at having surprised, or of

shame at having been surprised. When the question was put to Lucien Sireuil, an old friend of the couple, he replied with his enigmatical smile :

“My God ! I remember clearly that I was to plead the case, and I even regretted its falling-through, for it would have launched me ; I was just beginning then. But the deuce take me if I can say which one of the couple I was to aid and on which side of the bar we were to appear. Moreover, of what use is it to remember ? Death effaces everything.”

Whatever it might have been, the General's wife could flatter herself that she was one of the least compromised among the women who assembled in her drawing room every evening. She thought with the best faith in the world that she had always loved her husband to the exclusion of all others.

“An excellent man,” said she ; “somewhat restless, like all soldiers. But I pardon him, poor man !”

When more than sixty years old the General's wife was alone in the world, owing to the death of all her relatives, and to the negligence of the defunct Sauteyron who had left her without offspring. And, if the truth must be told, the good woman was utterly incapable of remaining alone more than five minutes.

As she was wealthy, thoroughly good-natured, and, above all, comfortably situated, her rooms in rue de Monceau became gradually a cosmopolitan circle, at which those who entered paid no assessment, and to which ladies were admitted. There

were to be found people of all nations, even French; women of all sorts, occasionally quite respectable ones. Famous Chevreuil showed to his visitors, at the Gobelin manufactory, a scale of colors most ingeniously arranged. The General's wife had her scale, too, less complete, to be sure, for she did not indulge in extreme shades. From time to time one could see there skeins somewhat dark, thanks to the complicity of easy introducers. The mistress of the house, very deaf and absent-minded, did not hear certain names very well. Those which would have made a granite Pharaoh sneeze by their odd consonances were totally unknown to her. Their identity better established, despair, bitter complaints were confided to the intimate circle, with coarse resolutions to "change all that."

Poor Nathalie! To hinder others from entering her salon! If only she had permission to leave it at her fancy, or even to remain there alone! For she almost pined away after an hour of solitude.

More than once, leaving for the theatre, she met on the staircase a joyous band coming to feast with her. Whether she willed or not, she had to retrace her steps, to have the lamps lighted, the card-tables set out, sandwiches buttered. Very often, when freed from one band, the General's wife was preparing to retire, a squad of fresh troops, coming from the Opera, invaded her rooms, and kept her up until five o'clock in the morning. At first, she took the matter good-naturedly; then, the following morning, awaking with a headache, she vowed that she would

close her door, and closed it indeed. A rebellion which did not last long. The second day, tired of conversing with her parrot and her maid, she had her horses harnessed at ten o'clock in the evening, and sought the remainder of her menagerie. Natalie's salon was an amusing place. They did not speak there of politics, literature, art, nor finance. In that curious set, many people would think that malicious tongues would have full sway. Quite the contrary! Each one only opening his lips to speak of himself, you were certain never to hear any one spoken of unkindly.

Mme. Fresnel was invariably amused there the first half-hour. Then she felt out of place, having nothing to relate about herself, and understanding nothing of the stories told before her in broken sentences, and portions of words intelligible only to the habitués.

Indeed, her sudden appearances cast a gloom over the assemblage. That young, discreet, calm, refined lady with the ways of a pretty, soft cat, contrasted strangely with the others. She made them uneasy. Involuntarily everyone changed his or her position; they spoke less loudly. For a few moments one might have thought oneself in the most rigid society. The old players of *bésique* upbraided her for her dislike to cards. The younger generation thought her a conceited prude. The men, generally, were on her side, but without enthusiasm. Several had asked permission to come to see her.

But, after three visits, they were no longer seen on Boulevard Saint Germain.

"Too insignificant, you know," said the most benign, with a grimace.

Others added:

"There is a mystery about her. That little woman has some one, you may be sure. Moreover, they say she has no fortune."

VI.

Several days after the evening of the tête-à-tête on which this story opens, Paul was pacing his room very much excited, while his evening dress was spread upon the chairs. The matter to be decided was if he should or if he should not go to dine in town.

He had no right to hesitate. He had received the invitation, he had accepted it. No illness, no death had occurred. They expected him; the host had told his guests that he was coming. In short, why hide it? It was to be one of those dinners so rare even in Paris.

But the weather on Boulevard Saint Germain was stormy. During the day, Chérancy had stood a fit of passion, and, at that moment, he was trying to devise some means by which Nadia would not be left in solitude, the danger of which he recognized for her. His kind heart and his affection counseled

him to send some excuse to his hosts, to dine at his club and to surprise his beloved, who, to tell the truth, had refused ten times, an hour before, the sacrifice he offered to make for her.

At the last moment the idea came to him that he could arrange everything; that thought by its unexpected results was to decide his life.

For the time being, in all ways, the arrangement did not succeed. His dinner did not give him any pleasure, and he himself afforded the others none; for he was preoccupied, nervous, scarcely tasted of the dishes, and wished the guests would eat without speaking, in order to finish sooner. At ten o'clock he entered his carriage and drove to Nadia's, whose surprise he pictured to himself. How she would reproach him for having left his host for her.

But one should mistrust the "*no*" of women to whom one offers a like sacrifice. Until nine o'clock Mme. Fresnel had awaited Paul.

"He left me sorrowful," she thought; "I know him. He will refuse the invitation and will return to me. The darling! he spoils me so! But I, too, will have a surprise for him. He shall find me gentle, calm, satisfied, appreciative of the joys of my life, his entirely!"

At twenty minutes past nine, Chérancy had not come, and Nadia was no longer gentle, calm nor satisfied. At half-past nine, a hundred times worse than she had been during the day, she dressed herself hastily and started for the house of the General's wife, where she found a full house.

Her entrance produced the usual effect. Everyone was silent, and the mistress of the house began to laugh, which was her way of welcoming people. The laugh varied according to the degree of friendship. With those to whom she was indifferent, Nathalie limited herself to two or three slight chuckles. If the visitor was a favored one, she bordered on a swoon and seemed on the point of suffocation.

Nadia, who had no desire to laugh, seated herself quietly, and the players of both sexes grouped around the tables, resumed their game, after having raised their heads to see "at whom Flore was barking." The saying originated with Valleroy, one of the tyrants of the house, possessing and cultivating without constraint the gift of clothing harsh truths in an unpleasant envelop.

A whist-player of advanced age, an Austrian Baroness,—some said German—extinguished the lamp, which hurt her eyes. In the large room could be distinguished vague groups scattered about in the corners.

Everyone was almost suffocated, thanks to a Princess with an "off," who was always shivering, for she was dressed in winter, as well as in summer, in white muslin and delicate laces. From that chilly looking cloud emerged a pretty, restless, fair head with two large eyes like those of a consumptive. She was known as "Princess Vampire," a very unjust nickname, to judge by her two ordinary and titled victims seated near her and struggling silently to please her with doleful sighs, burning glances and by cast-

ing logs into the grate. One of the men, short, as florid as a cock, as fat as a priest, as rich as Croesus, was a Jewish financier, very proud of being on familiar terms with a real princess. The other, a starveling, worn out from dissipation, very poor, dying of love, in the rigorous sense of the word, for that nervous woman who was fifteen years older than he was. But he was dying hard, different from the way in which a man of the old French family from which he sprang should die. His poverty, his passion submitted to strange trials, his alternation from enthusiasm to disgust for his idol, the unfortunate man hid nothing. He even laughed with the rest at his fate, in order not to give them the pleasure of laughing behind his back.

The adjoining room, the door of which was open, seemed as resplendent with light as the *salon* was dark. Its occupants were enjoying themselves thoroughly, and Nadia would gladly have participated in their enjoyment; but she saw there two or three young women whose impertinent lorgnettes intimidated her. Just at that moment Valleroy left the sanctuary and approached, his eternal cigarette between his lips, the sofa on which Mme. Fresnel and the General's wife were seated.

"For heaven's sake!" exclaimed Nathalie; "I believe some one is smoking in my room!"

"Oh! not very much," replied Valleroy, with perfect composure. "We were forbidden to smoke in the *salon* this evening on account of your tiresome Baroness' asthma."

"Well, my dear, smoke in the dining-room, then! Did you ever?"

"The ladies say they do not like to sup amid smoke. Do not excite yourself. When everyone is gone, your maid will open the windows for five minutes, and you will sleep as if you were in a grove."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Nadia, who liked warmth as much as does a cat. "It is freezing! But, at the present moment, the 'grove' seems to me to be inhabited by very noisy birds."

"Luzenac has just lost a wager which is the cause of all that tumult. That mad Elisabeth de Talamont bet with him that pretty Marot's foot was no smaller than her own. Championing his protégée's cause, Luzenac went straightway to the Opera to fetch the dancer's shoes, and Bess slipped into them without any difficulty. She is enraptured and desires to retain the trophy of her victory. Then followed forcible comments which would not interest a recluse living, like you, without the scandal of our world. That is all, dear Madam."

The General's wife, who had gone to take a glance at her room, returned angrier than ever. She said to Mme. Fresnel, the usual confidant of her despair:

"It is too bad! They have made of it a smoking-room, my dear, a smoking-room! Those people deride me! Postively, I shall leave for Nice to-morrow! Ah, my dear! When I compare my life with yours! . . . You are the happiest woman in Paris!"

At those words, Nadia felt within her one of those sudden reactions to which her disposition was subject. She compared her almost perfect happiness with the life of that poor, isolated woman, given up to the caprices of inconsiderate friends, and her heart melted in a transport of tenderness and gratitude to Paul. What would she not have given to flee from that *salon* to which so many times he had besought her not to go; to rush into the arms of him who was her all, whose love was worth more to her than all the pleasures of the world! How she would have thanked him for the happiness which for four years he had afforded her. How she would have breathed in his ear, with overflowing heart:

“Ah, give it to me forever, this happiness! Until my hair is white, until I die, and may Heaven receive me last!”

As she uttered those words in her imagination, her color became brightened, her eyes sparkled, she was truly pretty in her regret at being obliged to wait until the next day in order to repeat her prayer aloud.

She was aroused from her tender dream by a burst of laughter near her. The General's wife, suddenly consoled, laughed too, while a personage, unknown to Nadia, advanced slowly, staring at her with a cold, inquiring glance, which at first rendered her ill-at-ease.

It did not take long to see that the newcomer was very handsome and unsympathetic, but better bred, better educated than the usual frequenters of

Nathalie's salon. Addressing the latter, but without removing his eyes from Mme. Fresnel, he said, in a drawling, languid tone :

"Always merry, cousin, as I see?"

"My God! Edmund, I did not expect you!"

"You must be mistaken. You know very well that I never miss coming to wish you a Happy New Year."

"You are a model relative. But surely to-day is the twenty-fifth of January!"

"There is the rest of the month! Besides, you should have received my bonbons on New Year's eve. You have already forgotten them, ingrate!"

"Your bonbons!" exclaimed Nathalie; "Your bonbons! Do you think that I ate them?"

Then prudently putting an end to that bitter-sweet conversation, and turning to Mme. Fresnel, she said :

"My dear friend, permit me to present to you the Marquis de Roqueservière, my nephew."

Edmond bowed and was preparing to pay some compliment to his aunt's "dear friend." He was prevented from so doing by a deep voice, almost masculine in its volume, which said near him :

"Good evening, Camors."

A tall young woman, with a distinguished air, glided over the carpet toward him.

With both hands she held up her very simple, woolen gown in such a manner that she showed her silk stockings and her pretty feet, encased in the pink uniform of the ballet.

"Well!" said Roqueservière, without any surprise; "Are you going to the Opera?"

"On the contrary, the Opera has come with me."

Nathalie's room was deserted. The presence of the handsome Roqueservière was too rare an event not to excite the curiosity of the men as well as that of the women. The last to leave that "grove" was—Lucien Sireuil.

He perceived Nadia, who, in her turn, saw him. He shook his finger at her threateningly. A moment later, far from the group of which the Marquis was the centre, they seated themselves on a sofa near the door.

"No!" cried Nadia, stopping up her ears. "No sermon! I advise you not to condemn Nathalie's salon! You are its principal ornament. What are you doing here, severe man?"

"Looking for work."

"Well, whom are you to separate among all this goodly company?"

"There is nothing to be done here. I have this evening only found here two women still married. Bad clients for a lawyer! M. de Talamont requires only one thing of his wife: that she shall have no lovers, and in that way she is protected. As for Mme. Valleroy, she can have all the lovers she wants, her husband would not give me employment."

"I do not understand."

"Thank God! If you were to come here very often, I promise you that you would understand. See here,

dear, good woman, you are near the door, no one is looking at you ; slip out without saying anything, and return home."

"Upon my word, I was thinking of it. But tell me, first of all, who is this Marquis de Roqueservière?"

"One can see that you are from Bordeaux!"

"That was six years ago!"

"What have you been doing then? Seriously, do you not know Roqueservière, called Camors, the Lawyer, Blue-Beard?"

"No," replied Nadia. "But why so many nicknames for one man?"

"Because at once he is the most fatal of seducers, the most unwearying of arguers, and, finally, because he has two lawful wives in the cemetery."

"How old is he?"

"A little more than forty-six; but he says he is forty-eight, it being his rule to do nothing like other people. With regard to his marriages, he need not be pitied. He cared very little for his two wives; for the second, least of all, married for her money, which she bequeathed to him."

"And the first?"

"The first had not a sou. He took her when she was seventeen, for love, and left her at the end of eighteen months for love too—of another! Adventure seemed to seek him even in his wife's chamber."

"How dreadful!"

"And how improper! But the Marquis de Roqueservière is the most proper man in the world!"

He put an end to an unsupportable situation for his wife by casting her aside. Would it interest you to hear the names of his principal conquests?"

"Not at all. But, from what I can see, he is not remarkable for discretion."

"Dear Madame, Louis XIV. was, I believe, the most prudent of men. Yet Mesdames de Lavallière, de Fontange, de Montespan and several others were compromised by him."

"And where are we now with this handsome gentleman? With Mme. de Maintenon?"

"Oh! not yet. In the evening, in a coat, Roqueservière is always incomparable, as you can see. Turn towards him. Let us suppose that at this moment you are on the point of falling madly in love with him—"

"It would be your fault! But, let us suppose so!"

"One evening, while you are still struggling, you find yourself seated, at a ball, beside one of his ancient sweethearts; a grandmother with rabbit's eyes and a neck like a turkey-hen. You look at her; you think that there is a question of your having the honor of becoming her colleague; you meditate upon it; Roqueservière's very humble servant. One of these days they will close the Invalides. Do you know why? For the same reason; the young people no longer want it. The wounded of Tonkin do not like to meet there the wounded of Waterloo who call them 'comrades.' That savors too strongly of the 'brother, we must die,' of La Trappe."

"What has the poor Marquis done to you? You detest him."

"Ah! you are mistaken, I owe him too many cases. I only blame him for one thing; it is for having become, as he grew old, so sententious and pedagogish. He does not lack intelligence; but his intellect is as airy as those stone flowers which crown the brows of statues. However, it is not his fault, he is from Auvergne! Are you going, Valleroy?"

"I am not going, I am running away," replied the person questioned, who was indeed beating a retreat. "Roqueservière is proving scientifically to those ladies that they are wrong to paint and to dye their hair. It seems to me he is a disciple of Professor Petdeloup."

"Eh!" said Nadia, who was not interested in the subject; "I think that the speaker shows a certain amount of courage."

"Say a certain cruelty," replied Valleroy. "Look at the restoratives on the face of that poor Countess with whom Roqueservière refused to elope at the time of Sadowa, and judge of what it would be without repairs."

The faithful apostle disappeared, leaving Mme. Fresnel to continue her conversation with Sireuil. An instant later, Valleroy reappeared.

"Gentlemen and ladies," he cried, "a melting snow is falling, which is turning the sidewalk into a veritable bog. Some one has gone to fetch me a fiacre. Who wishes to go with me?"

Immediately parties began to form for the return home. Princess Vampire undertook to leave her two cavaliers at their doors, Valleroy took the Austrian Baroness, confiding his wife to Providence and to the good care of an old diplomatist serious enough not to compromise anyone. Mme. de Talamont disappeared with an American girl, fair and pretty, whom she had introduced that evening.

"Madame," said Marquis de Roqueservière, turning to Nadia, "My carriage is at your service. In this neighborhood fiacres are very scarce in such a deluge, the General's wife informs me."

Mme. Fresnel glanced at Nathalie, then at the Marquis, and replied, without her hearers being able to decide if it were candor or malice:

"But, sir, if I accept, how will you get home?"

Roqueservière, somewhat disconcerted at first, stammered that it could be arranged.

With her most gracious smile, Nadia replied that she was much obliged, that with patience a fiacre would be found, and that moreover from rue de Monceau to rue Saint-Thomas was a journey which she would not think of imposing on his horses.

The ladies thought Nadia's conduct prudish. As for the men, the snub given to the handsome Camors, who did not condescend to recognize them on the street, pleased them very much. But the general opinion was that it was bold. An unknown woman to refuse to enter a coupé which conferred as much *chic* as formerly the King's carriages gave to the nobility.

"He would not have eaten you, my dear," said the General's wife, when Roqueservière had departed alone. "You will not receive attention every day from a man like that."

"Nor you, either, from what I have just seen. But attention too soon is not politeness."

"Must one then know a woman ten years in order to leave her at her door when it rains?"

"Ten years are too long—but ten minutes are not enough. What can you expect? I have been brought up in the country. Good-night, do not be angry."

On reaching home, Nadia was vexed to find that Paul had been there.

"What a pity," thought she, "that I went to Nathalie's. I can fancy how furious he was. However, I have done nothing wrong and I had diversion."

"She hoped to see Chérancy the next day. Indeed, at three o'clock the bell rang; but it was not Paul. On the card handed to her, Nadia read, with some vexation:

Marquis de Roqueservière.

At first, instinct bade her refuse to see him. But after her rudeness of the preceding evening that would not do. She changed her mind, gave the sign, and the enemy entered the room.

VII.

In the Bois that morning, Roqueservièrre, on horseback, had met Mme. Talamont driving in her buggy in spite of the cold. They entered into conversation, which did not always happen, for they were *very good friends*, but *friends* who did not mince matters; in other words, who *detested* one another. They detested and at the same time respected one another—in their fashion.

The Marquis considered Elizabeth superior to the others, because she was the only one who had never been seriously smitten in the amorous comedies which he played with such inimitable art. That raised her above the general contempt with which he regarded women. They treated one another as comrades although there was a generation between them.

For some time each had known that the other was invulnerable. It could not be said that they avoided one another, but they certainly made no effort to meet.

"My poor Bess, do you always keep low company?" said Roqueservièrre, letting his cob walk beside the buggy, while he warmed his hands.

"Well, and you?" replied the lady. "I advise you not to boast of your exploits of last night. Since when have you known the virtuous *bourgeoise*?"

Edmond, who had already forgotten Nadia, made a sincere gesture of ignorance.

"Come!" persisted Mme. de Talamont. "You know very well! That pretty, little fair woman, who gave you the cold shoulder last night."

"Indeed, who is it?" asked Roqueservière, suddenly recollecting. "Is she virtuous? My good aunt then, wished to prepare a surprise for her guests?"

"She has succeeded, at any rate as far as you are concerned. You were thoroughly surprised. To refuse a seat in your coupé! Not to wish to be compromised by you! Confess that it was the first time that a woman played you such a trick! Truly! It was very comical, and reminded me of the story of Bidel's lion."

"What story?" asked Roqueservière.

"One day, as he was walking in the country, Bidel engaged a bold fellow to clean his animals. The following morning, do you know what the tamer saw on making his rounds? The fellow had entered the fiercest lion's cage and was washing his snout with a sponge with a self-satisfied air! The king of the desert, stunned, suffered himself to be washed, and, I am sure, contemplated the peasant with the same air which you had when you stared at Mme. Fresnel."

"What was that virtuous Mme. Fresnel doing at Nathalie's?"

"Feeding upon the sight of our depravity, I suppose. She comes, seats herself on the edge of a

chair, listens, stares, says nothing and goes away."

"Is she divorced?"

"Yes; but, as the saying goes, all the faults are on the side of the husband, who is over the Ocean."

"And she is really virtuous?"

"More than virtuous. She has never had a lover ascribed to her."

"Do you know her?"

"What! my dear, are you already seeking her address?"

"Well, no, I do not know it. Let us drop the subject. I am freezing."

They parted, the one very much pleased at having humiliated that proud conqueror, the other thinking of the story of the lion which that tease would tell everyone.

Roqueservière was not from Auvergne for nothing: he did not let the opportunity slip. Two hours had scarcely passed before he had found out from Nathalie Mme. Fresnel's address.

On leaving rue de Monceau, he set out at once for the number indicated on Boulevard Saint Germain.

After the information given him by the General's wife with the usual kindness of a daughter of Eve speaking of one of her sisters, handsome Edmond had pictured to himself in advance the entrance he would make: the cook in a dirty apron, wiping her fat fingers before taking the card and losing her head at the sight of a Marquis; the mistress of the house surprised in a flannel dressing-gown, or else

flying, to escape detection, towards her dressing-room, and reappearing in her most bewildering toilette hastily donned.

Instead of that, a neat maid held towards him a silver tray, examining him from head to foot with a cold stare. Then, after keeping him long enough to do away with all thoughts of eagerness to receive him, he was ushered into a salon, small but not at all vulgar, where an elegant lady, seated by the fireplace, watched him enter.

Nadia, for it was she, pointed to a chair. She was never timid in her own house. In her eyes could be read this saucy warning: If you utter a word which displeases me, I will put you out-of-doors like the others.

She was mistaken in thinking that he was like the others in Nathalie's salon.

Certainly, in his heart, he did not respect women; but he invariably accorded them, whatsoever they might be, the exterior deference imposed by a gentleman's education.

"Madame," he commenced, judging of the ground with his incomparable glance, "I did not count this morning on having the honor of seeing you to-day. But a friend whom I met made me fear that I displeased you yesterday."

"Displeased me, sir? I do not remember."

"So much the better! She was mistaken, then. However, when I offered you my carriage, you seemed . . . what shall I say? . . . offended."

"Oh, sir! How your friends exaggerate! I was

not offended ; at the most, I may have been surprised. To be frank with you, I was in the wrong. I should have remembered that at Mme. Sauteyron's, gentlemen frequently escort ladies home. But I am uncivilized. I should be exhibited at the Zoölogical Garden !”

“I fear,” said Roqueservière, “that you would not make much money there. The Parisians only like those who flatter them, and not those who condemn them.”

Thus, from the first, the Marquis entered upon his favorite role of a severe but just man, and Nadia could not refrain from smiling as she thought that the irreverent Valleroy had called him “M. Petdeloup.” Then she smiled with satisfaction at herself, at the thought that she had courage enough to smile, shut up all alone with the dangerous Roqueservière. The thought of all the great ladies, excelsencies, duchesses, princesses, in whose drawing-rooms that wonderful man had sat, as he was seated there near her. She was possessed with a desire to know how he had broken the ice on those occasions. Not by talking philosophy and worldly morals, to be sure, as he was doing at that moment. But his object was not the same to all appearances, and certainly Nadia did not think of complaining.

She recalled what Sireuil had said to her : “That man has brought misfortune to the majority of women whom he has conquered, beginning with his two lawful wives.”

Nevertheless, in listening to her visitor's conver-

sation she did not find him as prosy as she had been warned he was.

She respected him for being so sensible and was pleased to find him so unpretentious.

She gravely agreed with him, not daring to contradict that interlocutor who spoke like Solomon. Without thinking of giving offence, she resumed her embroidery, which did not at all please the handsome Edmond. That little woman whom he had come to put in her place was counting stitches before him! Bidel's lion, in seeking his revenge for the sponge, pricked his nose with a needle!

In thirty minutes the Marquis took his leave, his eyes sparkling, his chin thrown forward, his shoulders bent, all of which signs denoted a doubtful humor. On the other hand, Mme. Fresnel experienced the satisfaction of the young soldier emerging from battle. Perhaps, in her heart, she would have liked to have seen her bravery tried by a more serious cannonade; but no one could deny that she did not look contented. In the evening Paul arrived; his manner was somewhat cold.

"I shall not ask you where you were last night," said he.

"You do well, I should be obliged to confess that I was at Nathalie's."

And, as he opened his mouth for a reprimand into which he intended to put all the force of which he was capable, and that was not much:

"No sermon!" said she, sealing his lips with a kiss. "I have already had one to-day!"

Then, delighted at the unusual pleasure of being able to tell an interesting story, she recounted her adventure with Roqueservière, making a little fun of him, but not too much, for she wished to have the luxury—rare enough—of rendering Chérancy jealous.

The imprudent man, however, committed the error of exhibiting no jealousy.

“I know the rogue,” said he. “I even painted one of his teams for him. You are not the woman he wants. You may rest easy. You will not see him again.”

She saw him again, nevertheless, the following week, and she was pleased that Paul had been mistaken. Roqueservière found her more indulgent. He inquired into her private life as he would have into the construction of an interesting building, examining, finding fault, advising advantageous improvements.

What he did not say was that the object suited him very well, and that he was not far from undertaking the improvements. He was tired of sensual women, of *liaisons* which caused him to retire late. Moreover, the women of pure blood of the second empire could no longer be reproduced. Subjects were becoming rare, and he himself was less appreciated by the “saucy jades of the day,” as he called them.

That calm Nadia, without bad habits, without ambition, without passions, without nerves—he thought, without a lover—he tried to think—was precisely the woman he required.

He hoped to make of her, not the asylum for his old age, he had not reached that, thank God, but one of those convenient "heavens" where the idler avoids obstruction and rests from the bustle of the busy world. He returned with persistent regularity, counselling, instructing, reforming, sometimes severe, but always just and kind.

Nadia, at first surprised, allowed him to talk on, but ended by doing as she pleased; for she was not at all submissive. Then he retaliated by dwelling upon the sad position of a divorced woman, which left her so despondent that Chérancy had to take the consequences.

As for the latter, religiously informed of each of Roqueservière's visits, his life was far from being a bed of roses. He cursed the Marquis for his assiduity, cherished a feeling of ill-will towards Mme. Fresnel for receiving him, but did not dare to utter a word, lest he should appear jealous. When he found her downcast, he reprimanded instead of consoling her, as formerly.

"Come!" he scoffed; "Mephistopheles to-day enacted the church scene. He reminded you that you were abandoned by God and men. He exhorted you to remember the past, *et cetera*. I can hear him. Confess that only the organ was lacking!"

Preached at from one side, overwhelmed with epigrams from the other, poor Nadia looked upon men as very tiresome. She no longer dared visit the General's wife for diversion, for fear of losing

Roqueservière's esteem, for he spoke of that salon in a disparaging tone. Her great resource was in the architect's wife, who came to her at any time, impelled by the hope, often realized, of there meeting a Marquis, and such a Marquis!"

The shrewd diplomatist, after first having asked Mme. Fresnel how she could find pleasure in associating with that "cook," had relented on comprehending what harm the cook in question could do him were she so inclined. One day, even on passing, he had left two cards on the Lavissières' table. Since that time, Nadia's very sensible friend spoke of nothing but of her Marquis.

"Ah, my dear, what a man! How intelligent he is! How is it you are not raving over him? Of what are you made?"

The presence of the personage himself did not interfere in the least with Mme. Lavissière's transports; she would exclaim:

"Marquis! You are too handsome! What eyes! Like sapphires! And you say you are only forty?"

"Forty-eight, Madame. Tell it to everyone. I am too well preserved; it is absurd, I know it, but it is not my fault."

Then, while the architect's wife feasted her eyes upon him, her bosom heaving, her nose in the air, Roqueservière began a dissertation on the vanity of perishable personal advantages.

"Listen to him!" cried his enraptured admirer
"It is as if a Rothschild were to preach of the unimportance of wealth."

Indeed, before Nadia no one was mentioned but Roqueservière, when Roqueservière was not talking.

At times even she experienced a feeling of discomfort. In the meanwhile she heard with great joy of the intention of her cousin, Countess de Chalonne, to visit Paris. It was the first time during her widowhood, or, to put it in other words, the first time for three years, that the Countess was about to see the capital once more.

VIII.

To say that the Countess had grown handsome could not exactly express it, but her beauty certainly seemed heightened—more accessible. Altogether, she was more womanly; undoubtedly more severe with regard to herself, but not so quick to perceive the weaknesses of others. She had, at certain times, something less assured in her glance, less abrupt and more vibrating in her voice.

Paul, with his artistic eyes and ears, perceived the difference the first time he saw Claire de Chalonne after her bereavement.

“If one did not know your cousin,” said he to Nadia, “one might wonder at it. The loss of her husband has produced in her the same change which love ordinarily brings with it.”

That which had changed the Countess thus was

not the rupture of an old love nor the dawning of a new one. It was a discovery which it had taken her three years to make.

One day in the large castle, bowed beneath the burden of sombre crape, she was surrounded by relatives, neighbors and friends, less occupied with the dead whom they had just seen lowered into the grave than with the living who remained.

How could she live without him? She had loved him so devotedly!

That mute question was to be read in all the eyes fixed on the young widow and her child whom they had thrust into her arms, as one would push a life-buoy toward a drowning man. The old Marquis de Chalonne and his wife, in order to cheer her, forgot the sorrow which was crushing them. The priest, the confidant of her pure secrets, said to her:

“Bare your breast humbly to the sword, faithful Christian.”

She had not felt that sword, and her hand sought vainly for the wound. Bitter regrets, tender memories stirred her bosom, but she did not feel the incurable wound which deep, eternal love, the love she had considered herself so proud to possess, leaves behind it.

Perhaps the violence of the blow prevented her from feeling it at first. But time glided by, the days passed, months sped on, she did not feel the steel of the sword. On each of her visits to her beloved dead, while she kneeled upon the cold marble, from her eyes gushed the tears called forth by

the loss of a dear friend. She was astonished, she was angry, she blushed for herself. In the secret recesses of her heart she reproached herself with being an unfaithful love, an ungrateful spouse. She could not even help thinking of her cousin. She recalled that evening when a single glance from Paul had rendered Nadia almost beside herself.

“By such fancies,” thought she, “true passion is known. Nadia! Nadia! what would you do if he were to die?”

Then, more calmly, she examined her own heart, and, beside the cold grave, she comprehended that which the warm intercourse of the conjugal hearth had not left her time to perceive.

“Still,” said she to herself, “I kept for my husband all the thoughts of my childhood, all the enthusiasm of my youth. No other man obtained from me a glance nor a thought. He overwhelmed me with a happiness for which my heart and my lips thanked him daily. I lived to make him happy. I would gladly have died for him. Each separation was to me a sorrow. And, still I did not love him! . . . What then is love?”

It seemed to her as if she had fallen from a great height. She recollected the time when she had condemned faithless, unloving wives. She grew very humble on discovering that chasm which left her imperfect and as if incomplete. It required all her courage to reconcile her to live thus, secretly lowered in her own eyes.

“Fortunately,” said she, “I do not require love in order to train my child.”

This was, from that time forth, her great object; and the child, remarkably intelligent, aided her in her efforts. Three years had flown. In the interim, Mme. Fresnel had paid several visits to La Prée, and each time the change in Claire was more marked. Her cousin seemed to descend from a pedestal and to make her mount it. She was just as affectionate, but more gentle, less determined in her counsels. She seemed gradually to abandon her role of an impeccable elder sister. In that mood, she awed Nadia less and she made her less jealous.

After her arrival in Paris, too, the Countess was monopolized by Mme. Fresnel, whose private life, already disturbed by Roqueservière, had no longer the same mystery, the same charm it once had. At first, seeing that the Marquis was welcomed as an *habitué*. Claire de Chalonne, who knew him by reputation, knit her brows, but less severely than she would formerly have done. Soon she became reassured. From what she could see, the man was no longer a hermit; he had turned preacher and only opened his lips to utter words of wisdom.

Chérancy now appeared very frequently. Where the Marquis could go, he had no cause to remain away, and henceforth Nadia had not the same right to exhibit jealousy and to practice exclusion. So those four persons met often in Mme. Fresnel's drawing-room. Too clever to pay attention to two women, especially when one of them lived so

far away, Roqueservière did not seem to pay much heed to the Countess, although she surpassed in beauty not Nadia alone, but many of the Parisian belles. For her part, Claire cared less about the Marquis' polished sentences than for the bright, intelligent conversation of an artist and a sensible man like Paul.

While listening to him with a pleasure increasing from hour to hour, she observed his manner towards Nadia and could not understand it at all. What had taken place between them? How could Chérancy permit the attentions of a Roqueservière with such perfect indifference?

Faithful to the compact imposed by herself, she did nothing to provoke her cousin's confidence, but she grew sadder as the time drew near for her return to la Prée. One day, Paul, struck by that sadness, said to her:

"When I gaze upon you, I feel angry with Fate. Why is it that the most perfect happiness should be destroyed by her envious hand? The masterpieces of human felicity, as well as those of human art, should escape from the ruin. What supreme interest can keep the poor devils who have nothing at home with which to decorate their four walls from making a public museum of them, like the Louvre?"

"But," replied Claire, blushing somewhat, "why do you talk of the Louvre? Are you so destitute? Have you not happiness yourself?"

"Ah, happiness! . . . I have a copy of it, per-

haps. The original was in your possession. And yet, it is not you whom I pity, it is he whom death has deprived of you. It is true that he could not lose you in any other way. The bond which attached you to him was indissoluble, as strong as death itself."

Paul paused. For the first time he had detected the shadow of an allusion in Mme. de Chalonne's conversation. Had she perchance divined anything?

In the course of a few moments during which his eyes had not left the Countess, he resumed:

"If you would permit me to paint you, I would represent you with the expression you have now, and I would write on the canvas Dante's verses:"

"'For him who suffers, there is no danger greater than the memory of happiness gone forever.'"

The hour grew late. Claire, without replying, took leave of her cousin and returned to her hotel. Before going to sleep, she drew near the bed on which lay her daughter, and encircling her with her arms, she exclaimed passionately:

"Ah! faint heart! ungrateful heart!"

"Of whom are you speaking, Mamma?" asked little Marthe, suddenly awakened.

"Of some one whom you do not know, and whom no one knows, my child. Sleep and be happy."

Nadia did everything in her power to persuade her cousin to delay her departure. But Mme. de Chalonne was inflexible. She offered as a pretext her daughter's health. The child, indeed, was out-

growing her strength. At the doctor's advice, the mother and child were to pass the entire season in the mountains. The month of June began. It was necessary to return to la Prée to make preparations for a long absence.

Mme. de Chalonne set out. The evening of her departure Paul and Nadia were alone in the tiny *salon* in which they had spent so many pleasant hours.

"At length!" exclaimed Chérancy, opening his arms. It was, as they express it, an evening of the good, old times. Once again in their lives, those two beings enjoyed intimacy, tenderness, confidence. They spoke only of themselves, making, for the summer which was commencing, a thousand mysterious and delightful projects. It seemed to them that Roqueservièrè had never existed, but they did not mention him. At a sign from the master of her heart, Mme. Fresnel would have closed her door to all the Roqueservièrès in the world.

The following day, on awakening, Nadia received a bouquet with these words:

"You must be very sad this morning. Permit a devoted friend to fill somewhat, with these flowers, the void left by your charming cousin. Roqueservièrè."

The young lady was deeply touched by the attention and told herself that a selfish man would not have thought of it. As for Paul, to whom the matter was referred, he was forced to agree that the

note was not anything exceptional and that the gift of the flowers was not either.

"It is a bouquet for a virtuous woman," he declared. "Roqueservière is a master in the art of shades."

He spoke with an ironical smile, but, beneath the irony, Mme. Fresnel thought she could divine vexation.

"Would you like me to send these flowers back?" she asked suddenly.

"It is too late, now. Moreover, what right would I have to order you? I am not your husband."

The reply was not a happy one. Nadia knew only too well that she had no husband. Wounded in her sensitive point, she said to Paul:

"You are only my love, it is true. But you have assured me so often that you would like to be my husband!

Her eyes were filled with tears. Paul, himself again, clasped her in his arms:

"And I tell you so once more," said he. "On my honor and on our love, I would marry you to-morrow if I could!"

It seemed, however, as if Roqueservière had awaited the departure of Mme. de Chalonne, if not to unmask his batteries, at least to draw them nearer with patient tranquility. The mouths of these cannon were not yet distinguishable, but one could see, laid out in line, the green hillocks which would have presaged no good to the eyes of a besieged having more experience.

The severe but just man turned to the flatterer and optimist. The professor fell in admiration before the progress of his pupil. He had half fabricated, half discovered a new Nadia, serious, formal, reasonable, laying out the slightest words and actions with a line, as a gardener plants his cabbages. He had proclaimed her a "superior woman," and, with that word he had led her into the ring like a circus-rider.

Since her promotion to the grade of "superior woman." Mme. Fresnel nourished against Paul a secret displeasure. Vainly, when they were alone, did she thrust her new laces before his eyes. The blind man refused to see them. He treated her as a gracious, good, true and beloved woman, as a "superior woman," and, to be revenged upon him, she treated him as a superficial man only appreciating in others secondary qualities. What a difference between him and the Marquis!

The latter deigned occasionally to descend to things of the flesh, and to be amusing. He related stories of the Court of the Second Empire, or else the tittle-tattle of the club.

At such times he exhibited a certain skepticism and experience. He avowed that above the most sincere fidelity and the most rigid virtues, soared victoriously the fatal spirit of ruin, and that that mighty spirit had condescended on more than one occasion to lend him his wand. He uttered these, words not boastfully, but with an air of conviction his eyes glowing: and poor Nadia, more troubled

than she cared to appear, glanced sideways at the Marquis' cane, fearing to see it grow to the size of a magical sceptre. Still, the arrival of bouquets continued. They appeared regularly Wednesday and Saturday mornings, as Paul sneeringly remarked, on the day after the flowers were sold at the Madeline: for some time his disposition had not been very amiable. "That Roqueservièrè has always," said he, "been famous for profiting by *occasions*."

Nadia, enervated, took a dislike to men, bouquets and love in general. Not once, since the Marquis had visited her, had a word been uttered which the world might not have heard. And yet she felt disturbed.

"Why did I go to Nathalie's?" she groaned
"Why was I left alone that evening?"

Towards the end of June Roqueservièrè thought that the time had come, and poor Nadia heard the anthem which so many others before her had heard from the same lips. He uttered the words calmly, as great artists sing a cavatine in Italian, caring more for the music than for the gestures. He was neither violent nor ungentlemanly, nor seemed anxious, although he was, for the season was almost over.

No one could ever have imagined his surprise when Mme. Fresnel, at the first overtures, rejected him, as she had done so many others. Nadia repeated to him, emphasizing the words, that she could not give herself to him, that he was entirely mistaken in supposing to the contrary, and that she

had never expected the honor of his acquaintance to go so far.

At no time of his life had the handsome Marquis been so near swearing in the presence of a refined lady. However, he restrained himself, and, as he was to dine at seven o'clock with a Viscountess de Saint Rieul, whose head he was beginning to turn; he rose without any further discussion and took his leave with a grave air:

"Au revoir, madame," said he, simply, in a tone behind which could be distinguished the famous wand.

In his heart, he experienced more ennui than anger, and he even felt somewhat uneasy.

He was wounded less in his Don-Juan-like self-love than in his reputation as an untouched man, not yet recognizing the bitter chagrin of no longer being able to do to-day what he could do yesterday. He felt the superstitious shock experienced by a gambler, lucky from the commencement of the game, but who fears to see fortune turn against him.

"Plague take the affected woman!" thought he. "Am I one of those men whom the women reject without caring, hinting that they find them somewhat mature? The devil take me if that ingenious person did not fancy that I came to her house for her lovely eyes and her wit! Positively she would have been struck with amazement if I had explained the question. She was not even afraid! My lovely child, patience! No one scoffs at Roqueservière." However, Nadia, while apparently composed, was

more frightened than she seemed to be. That evening Chérancy did not recognize any change in her. She clung to him with that confiding, childlike, rather humble tenderness which was her great charm, and which she had shown less, it must be avowed, since Roqueservièrre, that great connoisseur, had especially favored her.

Paul, that evening, was replaced upon his pedestal, flattered, cajoled, consulted, spoiled. But, less shrewd than the husband in the story, he did not know to what thief he was under obligations.

Ah, that delightful evening! How happy he was on returning home! What a long future of joy, of fidelity, of devotion, he saw before him! With what enthusiasm he would accept a life passed, if necessary, entirely without domestic ties, in order to be forever the support of that dear creature who had no one but him! Moreover, one obstacle alone separated them, a man hidden in some part of America under a false name. To-morrow, Nadia might be free! And then, before the entire world they would belong to one another forever.

Poor blind creatures, poor fools that we are! His heart would have ached had he known that, for the first time, Nadia hid a secret, and such a secret! She was silent, to tell the truth, rather from prudence, than from lack of candor. She entertained for the Marquis only one sentiment: an intense rancor.

"If, however," thought she, "a feeling of true love had impelled him to say to me what he dared! Oh, miserable loneliness which authorizes everything!

Well! he will not return any more. It was a disagreeable dream I had. Certain dreams need not be recounted!"

IX.

Nadia was mistaken; the Marquis did return.

His dinner at Viscountess de Saint Rieul's had strengthened his mind, shaken by a passing shock. The other invited guests retired in good season, and, as the Viscount, a great sportsman, had gone to the races, Roqueservière, left alone, had no occasion to be dissatisfied. It had been proven to him in a peremptory manner that he was always young, and that women had every conceivable reason for fearing him.

The Viscountess had a mansion on rue Galilée, a castle at Poitou, and when she did not appear at the Opera on Friday evening eighteen hundred people wondered:

"What has happened to Mme. de Saint Rieul?"

But Roqueservière—many others are modeled from the same pattern—would have given a dozen duchesses ready to say "yes" for the little woman without a castle, a mansion or a box at the Opera who said "no." That "no" was an ill-omen, in spite of everything, and the matter, leaking out, would prove a bad example. It was absolutely necessary that Nadia's "no" should become "yes."

So the Marquis reappeared at Mme. Fresnel's, and

no later than the day after his check. But the night had brought wisdom: he had reflected. He was another Roqueservière, vanquished in love, and, that goes without saying, in love for the first time in his life. Mme. Fresnel did not anticipate that and did not even think it necessary to forbid admission to that new convert. At first, surprise deprived her of the power of speech.

“Alas!” groaned the good apostle, “I am the more surprised of the two. In love at my age, after the mad life I have led! For a month, I have blushed as if ashamed of the sentiments dawning in my heart, frozen until this time. I wished to hide my weakness from you. With you I feigned cynicism, as with the others I played at passion. Ah! but you have avenged them gloriously! How they would smile at my defeat could they see me to-day!”

Unfortunately for Nadia, those ladies were too far away to laugh, and could not aid her with their experiences. Tell me that women are credulous on such a subject! Certainly Mme. Fresnel would not have wagered a large sum on the sincerity of Roqueservière’s love; but after all, if novels are to be trusted, nothing is more common than for a mature man of the world to fall a victim to such an accident.

“Let us be friends and you go away,” she proposed.

“I will try to be your friend,” said he, with a heart-rending sigh, “or, at least, I will love you with a love so disinterested that you will not be

able to forbid me. But to leave you! Do not ask it of me!—Let me see you, hear your voice which at one and the same time distracts and calms me. Yesterday I was beside myself, but do not fear a relapse. My fate was to end in a sincere love. What destiny does accomplish! Fear nothing from a man whom you have chained and who blesses his bonds.”

He was not, however, bound by so short a chain that he could not make grand gestures, fall upon his knees, raise his arms to heaven, clasp his forehead with his hands, then suddenly kiss those of Nadia as he would have kissed a reliquary.

Assuredly, the prisoner she had just captured, in spite of herself, embarrassed the young woman very much, and yet, since he had reassured her, he began to interest her. She glanced at him curiously, as she would have examined, before freeing it, a swallow which had made its way into her room.

“How different from Paul!” thought she, when the bird had gone. “What a torrent of words! What a hurricane! I can understand that a woman, coquettish and thoughtless, might have her head turned somewhat.”

She herself experienced several symptoms of vertigo. From that time, the Marquis’ letters even showered upon her, or, rather, arrived with the regularity with which a stream of water drops upon and wears away the stone. One came in the morning, one in the evening. She had read the first to see if she could read it. She read those which fol-

lowed as one reads the continuation of a well-written interesting novelette. Letter-writing was, indeed, the Marquis' strong point; his somewhat dull wit accommodated itself better to writing than to speaking. His letters were masterpieces. Delicate and deep thoughts, perfect caligraphy, nothing was lacking, not even a comma. They might have been used, according as occasion demanded, as models of sentiment, of style or of penmanship.

Chérancy, it will be understood, was not permitted to enjoy them. Before showing them to him, it would have been necessary to tell him many things which from day to day became more difficult. Each day, too, the Marquis' visits grew longer.

Nadia received them with a mixture of curiosity and fear, experiencing, at a familiar peal of the bell, a slight shudder which was not without its charm. Moreover, she did not feel guilty. Roqueservière, faithful to his promise, suffered in silence.

One morning, instead of the usual four pages, the Marquis' letter only contained these words:

"I can stand it no longer! Your affectionate and patient kindness rend my heart more than would the rudest treatment. That miserable torture can not last. When you read these lines I shall be far away.—Where?—What matters it to you?—Adieu?"

"Poor Marquis" thought Mme. Fresnel, slightly moved. "Why did he not come to tell me that he was going? I would have given him a kind word."

Her conscience eased by that departure, Nadia was only the more disposed to pity. All that day

she was sorry for the traveler; but on the next, and on those which followed, she was sorry for herself. The hours seemed long to her. She felt somewhat stunned, her ears buzzed and her temples throbbed, as so often happens when one passes from a loud bustle into sudden silence. At the end of a week she confessed that she could spare anyone rather than Roqueservière. She thought of him constantly. On the fifteenth day she said to herself:

“My God! Suppose he should never return!”

She understood, then, the inevitable and fatal fascination of which he had often told her. She feared it more since the fascinator was far away, as one fears an invisible, hidden weapon.

She fancied she felt the magician enveloping her in his magnetic passes, lulling her will to sleep at a distance.

In the midst of that languor she saw her door open, then close. Roqueservière, disheveled, pale, emaciated, fell rather than kneeled upon the carpet. His excitement was startling and seemed to border on madness.

“I can not help it!” he moaned. “It is stronger than I! I was at the other end of France, but I was obliged to return, to see you, to hear you again! . . . Nadia! . . . my queen! my tormentor! my idol! . . . Shall I then never be anything to you but a stranger to whom your heart can not accord the smallest space?”

"Leave me, for pity's sake!" she murmured, not knowing what she said.

"Ah! merciless woman! I would fly to the end of the earth, if by that means I could win your love!"

"Go, then," she replied, distracted, stunned, intoxicated. "It is I who ask mercy of you! You will ruin me!"

"Nadia! Do you love me?"

"Yes," she moaned, closing her eyes.

Roqueservière, triumphant, was already upon his feet, but it was not to fly. With her hands she repulsed him, with so much force that he almost lost his balance.

He was shrewd; he saw that by taking one more step at that moment he would risk winning the battle. In a transport of delight he kissed the hem of Nadia's gown; then, standing erect, radiant, transfigured, he exclaimed:

"That is sufficient joy for one day. You have just afforded me more happiness than I have received from any other woman. I am yours for life."

With those words, he disappeared, in order to seek repose; for he had not told an untruth when he said he had come from a distance. He came from the frontiers of Spain and he required rest.

X.

In the evening, when Paul arrived at his friend's, he did not find her, as usual, installed in the little low easy chair from which she watched him enter, smiling, awaiting his first caress. Mounted on a stool, she was taking infinite pains to arrange a drapery, the effect of which she seemed to be trying. In that work, which was not at all urgent, the young woman—as a rule not given to working—seemed completely absorbed.

Paul, very fond of such work in his capacity of an artist, hastened to take off his hat, to send for a ladder and the requisite tools. In fifteen minutes, with the most minute care, without sparing any pains, he had finished the work begun by Nadia. As he put in the last nails, he said to her:

“I could fancy that we are married and that I was settling our household.”

On descending his ladder, he came near setting his foot on a kneeling human form, sobbing very low, its head in its hands.

“Nadia!” he exclaimed, trying to clasp her in his arms. “For heaven's sake, what ails you?”

She repulsed him gently and her despair burst forth with startling violence. Her entire form was shaken by convulsive hysterics, beside which those that Paul had witnessed were as nothing. She

attempted to speak, but deep sighs, heartrending to hear, alone escaped from between her lips.

“My dearest! My beloved! the support of my life!” said she, at length. “For what a miserable creature are you taking so much trouble!”

She fixed upon him her streaming eyes. She addressed him with clasped hands, her features expressing complete desolation. Chérancy, himself as pale as death, his heart oppressed by a dire presentiment, listened to her with anguish, not daring to approach her.

With an excitement which showed her trouble, she continued :

“My lovely flower-garden, I have devastated you with my own hands! I have trodden underfoot your pretty roses? All is destroyed! My house, built upon the solid rock, is in ruins. And now I must wander about, like a beggar without shelter. Paul! Paul! I have lost you! Why did I not die sooner?”

She was no longer weeping. Her tearless, dilated eyes shone like those of a madwoman. Chérancy made several fruitless efforts to speak, but his throat contracted. Finally he succeeded in asking the simple question :

“Has M. de Roqueservière returned?”

She divined the other question, that which a gentleman, respectful to a woman to the last, generously spares her ear. With a bound, she rose :

“By my mother’s soul,” she cried, grasping his

hands, "I have not done the horrible thing which I read in your thoughts."

"Then, what is it?" he asked, unable to comprehend what he saw.

She fell upon her knees again, and once more uttered those moans so plaintive.

"But, great God! Speak!" . . . said Paul. "You will kill yourself and me at the same time."

"I do not know what *he* has done to me," she groaned. "I do not understand it myself. He came, he came—Oh! Paul! why from the very first did you not command me to close the door upon him?"

Chérancy maintained silence. He could say nothing until he knew all.

"Two weeks ago," she continued, "that man left suddenly. He was very much disappointed at obtaining no hope from me. He loved me devotedly and tried to induce me to fly with him."

"He loved you devotedly! Do you believe it, poor fool?"

"I am more than a fool," she replied, humbly. "I am the maddest of the mad. My dear Paul, I love you as much as my heart is capable of loving. You would not believe me were I to tell you with what joy I learned of the departure of that man. For fifteen days you were kind, devoted, loving to me." . . .

"Not kinder, more devoted, more loving than for four years!"

"If you speak to me of those four years, my poor

friend, I shall never come to the end of what I have to say to you. Yesterday he, whom I shall never name again, suddenly reappeared. I did not expect him. Moreover, my God! I did not wish to see him! He surprised, frightened, subdued me. I lost my self-control, and I told him . . . I told him that which he desired to hear."

"That you loved him?" said Paul, whose voice was so hoarse that it was scarcely audible.

By a gesture, Nadia assented. Then Chérancy, with a firm step, advanced to the table on which he had laid his hat, and took it in order to go. He smiled almost pitifully on seeing the ladder, the hammer, the nails. He glanced at the drapery which he had just arranged with so much zeal in order to spare his beloved fatigue. Another, henceforth, would render her those services.

"When you look at that," said he, raising his hand towards the material, "you will think of me."

That was the only bitter word which Nadia was to hear from that strangely self-possessed man. Without turning his eyes upon her, he walked to the door. Nadia, still on her knees, turned to watch him to the last.

"I will think of you," said she, in a voice as soft as music, "until the last moment of my life. Every nook in this room will remind me of you. Paul! listen to my last words! You know that I never tell you an untruth! I love you! And always remember one thing: by telling you nothing, by being less frank, I might have kept you."

"That is true," said he, pausing on the threshold "I respect you for it. You are free, moreover. You belong to me by no bonds."

"I belong to you by all the bonds which can enchain the heart and the body of a poor woman. At this moment, I love you as I have never loved you. As for *him*, I hate him; he has ruined me. For without you, I am lost and you know it. Take with you that revenge. It may comfort you some time if you need comfort."

"Who knows?" said Paul, his hand upon the bolt. "Why will you not be very happy with him?"

"Oh! my beloved! do not be cruel! I would have loved you more had you gone without saying anything. Paul! God only knows what a miserable creature I shall be some day. But there is one man among them all with whom I shall have nothing to do. That man is he! How could I forgive him for the hour we have just spent?"

At that moment, Chérancy, raising his eyes, saw Nadia totter.

"Ah! poor, little one!" he exclaimed, rushing towards her, "do not grieve."

Once again she leaned her head on the breast upon which she had rested so often. She murmured, as if in a dream :

"No, I must not be ill. No one will care for me anymore. Dearest, do you remember my last illness? It was not very serious and yet you wanted to watch beside me. I permitted you to do so for the pleasure of keeping you an entire night at my bedside, look.

ing at me with your large, lovely eyes, as during that other night, the first, that on which we traveled together."

Paul, conquered, felt all his strength, all his dignity, all his pride, ebb away.

"Listen," cried he, clasping her in his arms. "Perhaps we can still be happy. Let us go away! It is not necessary for you to remain here. Your health will not stand the strain. To-morrow I will take you far away. Since you say it has all only been a disagreeable dream,—and I swear that I believe you,—all can be effaced. A nightmare is easily forgotten."

"You would do that!" she exclaimed, trembling. "You would do that! There is, then, in the world a man capable of such a wonder!"

"I beseech you, be calm. Do not exalt my worth in such a manner. Nadia, I need you; my life without you would be ruined. Your love is everything to me. Sole treasure of my heart, you can still love me, can you not?"

"You ask if I can love you, my king, my god! But I have not yet loved you up to this time! From now on, you shall see what the adoration, the devotion, the humble and passionate gratitude of a human soul can be! Alas! I have nothing to pardon—but you! Will you be able to forget? Will not that heroism which to-day intoxicates you appear in a week, in a month, the most stupid blindness?"

Nadia wished to be convinced. Paul, in order to

divert her from the emotion which still caused her to waver, spoke instantly of the preparations for their departure and of their destination. They both were too much in need of repose and of composure to decide anything that evening. It was, however, essential to go away; but, before leaving for any length of time, Chérancy would have to spend two days in the country in order to arrange a pressing matter of business.

"Two days without seeing one another!" sighed the young woman. "Oh, Paul!"

"You will not have more than two days in which to pack your trunks. Fill them very full; we shall go far away, and God knows when we will return. The day after to-morrow I must find you ready to start."

He stood erect, his hand upon the lock, and yet he did not leave the room, revolving in his head one last thing which he had to say—a painful thing, to judge by the frown upon his brow.

"It is not necessary," he said at length, "that the man should return to trouble you. Would it not be well—would it not be best to write him that you will be absent a long time?"

"You fear his visit for me?" she replied, with a sort of ardent enthusiasm. "Ah! you do not know the need which fills my soul! I long to see him, to speak to him, to take back from him a gage given in a moment of madness, those words which some witchcraft drew from me, to tell him that I do not love him, that I will never love him. I should never

feel myself worthy to be yours again, if, first of all, I had not re-conquered myself."

Paul felt tempted to reply that for a woman the most ingenuous retreat was better than the most intrepid combat.

But he did not speak, seeing the light which shone in the eyes of the warrior. Perhaps, too, he experienced some consolation in picturing to himself in advance the discomfiture of the invincible Marquis. He returned home and, the next day early in the morning, he set out for his estate of Beauce. He thought, on his return, that he could leave the "same night" with Nadia. But he found upon his table a letter which changed all his plans: it was from Mme. Fresnel, who wrote:

"He came and I told him all that I intended to. But I should have been too lightly punished if all had terminated so easily. I have to deal with a tenacious man, and, above all, with a man overflowing with pride. He can tolerate, it seems, that a woman should not love him; but the thought that the woman would reject him for another makes him furious. Indeed, he frightened me; not for myself. I divined that he would spy upon me; in other words, would find us out. Dearest, my honor is more precious to you than your life; your life is my all here below. Both must be guarded; for a time I must sacrifice myself." . .

"M. de Roqueservière had scarcely re-entered his carriage than I summoned my maid and began to pack my trunks. In two hours I shall start, and I swear to you that at the moment of writing I do not yet know whither I shall direct my flight, for it must be confessed that your poor Nadia's brain is confused.

"To-morrow morning, on regaining my self-possession, I will tell you where I am, where to write to me. But, my friend, you must not come to me. You must remain in Paris; you must be

seen everywhere; you must appear very happy. It must be so, for you will be watched, followed. By rejoining me sooner than is prudent, you might lose all. Paul, be good, merciful, patient. Forgive me this new trouble which I am bringing upon you. You have forgiven me many other things. Put yourself in the place of a still trembling woman, and be strong, you who are a man. Have confidence in the future and in my love, which is boundless, as it will always be. To-morrow a letter, very soon you, that means happiness and the end of all trials. Ah, God, how far off that seems!"

Chérancy read that letter twice and tried his best to judge it calmly. On the one hand, his pride rebelled at the thought that Nadia should fly in order not to expose him to Roqueservière's ill-humor. On the other, he was forced to confess that on that occasion there was a question of more than a sword thrust given and received. A woman's reputation was at stake. He yielded, with reluctance, perhaps; but, after all, love, loyalty, devotion were expressed in every line he had just read. Moreover, he had not his choice for the conduct to be observed by him, since he was face to face with an accomplished fact. At any rate, it was a matter of only a few days, and he would soon know all about it.

The day seemed interminable to him. Obeying the advice, the wisdom of which he could not dispute, he went everywhere, to the Acacias in the afternoon, to his club where he dined, to the circus where he saw "all Paris," with the exception of Roqueservière. The next day was exactly like the one preceding it. The dawn of the third morning found Paul awake, awaiting Nadia's letter; but the

postman brought him none. Twenty-four hours later, affairs were just the same.

For the first time in four years the woman whom he loved had caused him sorrow, as she herself had said. Four years of tranquility interrupted only by the inequality of a nervous, restless disposition! But, for four days, how dearly he had paid for it all! Incapable of controlling himself any longer, he repaired to Mme. Fresnel's. The porter, very much surprised at such ignorance on the part of a man whom he had good reasons for believing better informed, replied, with a stare:

"Why, sir, Madame left Wednesday evening."

Paul had the courage—degrading in his own eyes,—to question that man who knew his secret and guessed his torture.

"Madame did not leave her address?"

"Madame said nothing."

Paul seemed so discontented that the porter was sorry for him. Heaven forbid that you should ever excite the commiseration of a porter!

"But," added the man, almost in a whisper, "Madame went to Montparnasse station!"

Chérancy fled, blushing as if he had accepted alms. At that moment he was vexed with her who had subjected him to such affronts. With the instinctive need of venting his anger on someone, he committed the rash act of presenting himself at the Marquis'. Fortunately, he did not find Roqueservière there.

"Is the Marquis in Paris?" he asked.

This time he inquired of a female, who gave him the most minute details without any urging. They had not seen Roqueservière since Wednesday evening. But the next morning the Marquis' valet had received a telegram, and, a few hours later, he had rejoined his master, taking with him a large valise. With regard to the destination Chérancy could learn nothing.

"Mr. Dominique and I don't speak," said the portress, pursing up her lips; "he is a sly, disagreeable fellow, who thinks himself superior to everyone because he is his master's confidential man. I only know that he went to Montparnasse station."

Paul fled, forgetting, in his agitation, to throw a louis to "M. Dominique's" enemy. He returned home in order to collect himself in the midst of the crisis which disturbed his life, and, seating himself at his table, his gloves still upon his hands, his hat upon his head, he stared into space.

In a similar situation, the first cry which escapes a woman's breast is :

"He no longer loves me !"

Paul asked himself, as any other man would have asked in his place :

"Have I been her dupe ?"

At first he would not entertain the thought of a vulgar hoax, as needless as odious.

Supposing that Mme. Fresnel had yielded to Roqueservière's importunities, or that she intended doing so, she had no need to employ so much mystery and so much strategy. Three days before,

Chérancy stood on the threshold of her door; she had only to let him go, with the tears more or less sincere which are, in such cases, the last tribute of a refined woman towards the lover she rejects. Chérancy had conducted himself well: no noise, no despair awakening pity, no threats against anyone.

Moreover, that excited, trembling creature who had just given a fresh example of the frailty of woman had at the same time shown herself to be such as he had always known her, that is to say, the most loyal of women and the most loving too. Poor Nadia! Certain gestures, certain sighs, certain bursts of sorrow did not deceive.

No, Roqueservière was not with her!

But then, where was he? At the same hour, on the same day, they had disappeared in the same direction without leaving any traces. All the reasoning, all the confidence in the world were not potent enough to destroy the unexceptionable argument. The least one could do was to suspect. To suspect, oh shame! To live face to face with the image of his own absurdity! To feed his sorrow in inaction, or to inflict upon himself a thousand torments in order to hear one day the exclamations of two fugitives discovered in the shelter of their intoxication.

Chérancy arose, shrugging his shoulders beneath the insupportable weight which oppressed them, and, without deciding between accusation and defense, he put aside the matter until the morrow, counting on the hours to come to furnish him with evidence.

"To-morrow night I will set out," he decided, "if I have heard nothing new."

The time passed ; then, having received no letter, and feeling assured of Roqueservière's continued absence, he left Paris, carrying with him in his heart that disgust of self and of life which succeeds great disappointments.

XI.

Two days later, Chérancy reached Caunterets, which was still empty, for July had scarcely begun. But he had counted on that solitude, and his intention was to fly to the mountains as soon as tourists arrived. He had hesitated first between the Pyrenees and the Alps. The picturesqueness, more warm, more easy, to embrace, of the Southern chain had determined his choice ; for it was more for painting than for traveling that he went. Cruelly wounded, Paul knew from experience that here below there was only one remedy against sorrow and that was work. The sound of human voices dulls sorrow, change of place diverts for the time being ; work alone, continued with a strong will, can cure it. Work is the only mistress which has never disappointed, never rejected, never deceived those who love her.

Every morning Chérancy ascended the Lac de Gaube, where he had begun a study. That two hours' climb in the shady gorge, wet with the dews of

heaven and the vapor of the cascades, did him good. His lungs expanded, as he inhaled the odor of the pines. His heart, even, was less heavy, and that hour of the day seemed to him the best of all.

At the shabby inn he found his canvas, his umbrella and his paints. Then he sought the spot he had chosen on the deserted edge of the blue waters, and set to work, making feverish haste in order to chase away importunate thoughts. The innkeeper, too, deceived by his application to work, thought him poor, and, with many requests that he would say nothing, offered to reduce his rates for him.

Tourists were rare. Often Paul finished a sitting, not having had any other visitors than his host, the latter's wife, a pretty woman with black eyes, and two charming little girls, always accompanied by a dog larger than they were. Occasionally huntsmen asked him for a light for their pipes; or else some fisherman clattered his heavy *sabots* on the rocks below him, lashing the air with his pole. But the great admirers of his painting were the Spanish contrabandists, who crept about like cats, leaping from rock to rock, in spite of their enormous burden. They paused behind Paul to breathe, rolled a cigarette and pointed enraptured to the canvas on which rose Vignemale covered with snow.

One day one of those innocent mountaineers amused Paul very much by asking him if one could see Vignemale from Paris.

"No," replied Paul, with a laugh; "the houses are in the way."

But, the contrabandists gone, the poor fellow no longer felt a desire to laugh.

"I would to God," thought he, "that this mountain was high enough to permit me to perceive the spot in which they are concealed! How rapidly I would have climbed it! How comforted I should feel after having chastised the wretched man who has ruined my life!"

For he no longer doubted that he had been the victim of an adroitly planned ruse.

"And I," thought he, his fists clenched, "furthered their plans by leaving Paris in order to let them depart at their convenience!"

That day at about five o'clock in the evening, on crossing the esplanade to return to his hotel, Chérancy perceived, not without some vexation, that the number of bathers had doubled since the preceding day, and that he must plant his tent in a more peaceful spot. As he continued his walk, glancing at the promenaders among whom he feared to distinguish familiar faces, he was aroused from his preoccupation by the sound of voices which cried quite near him:

"Down with the gendarmes!"

He paused, like a good Parisian, to watch the riot, and was reassured by the sight of the insurgents who, seated in a circle at the foot of a striped sentry-box, had for weapons only sugar batons that they brandished wildly.

It was not the first time in his life that Paul had assisted at the quarrels of Punch with Pandora.

But the director of the theatre, Guignol, at Cauterets, was a clever man who had found the means of not only always having a full house, but of having as well an audience which plays the piece with him and for him. There the dialogue was changed from one side of the railing to the other. Punch talked with his spectators; he had no secrets from them; he received their advice, consulted them when needful, and did not disdain to interrupt his rôle to put his small wooden hand in the hand not much larger of subscribers who were late.

He knew by name a number of those gentlemen and ladies; he was a friend to them, and the last scene arrived, he asked them what termination they would prefer that day, punishment or escape, burial or marriage? It mattered little to him, provided they were satisfied.

Punch, too, could count forever on that appreciative public from whom he received all those favors. When the gendarme advanced with stealthy steps to seize his enemy by the collar, he disappeared with shrill cries:

“Take care! He is coming! He has a large stick!”

When it was a question of clandestinely removing his furniture or of doing away with his wife's murdered body, Punch had only to follow the advice of the pet which knew how to extricate its favorite. On that particular day Punch had committed one of his usual errors; he had just knocked down Colom-

bine and ingeniously remarked that he had struck her "somewhat hard."

"But," he pleaded, "what an insupportable person! You have seen her; she will listen to nothing. And when women are not obedient, one is forced to beat them!"

The majority of the public, prejudiced in his favor, sided with that husband so eager for his rights. But a large child often rose in order to make herself heard:

"No," said she, gravely; "women should never be beaten; you are a wretch, M. Punch!"

"Oh! Mlle. Marthe!" implored the murderer, "how hard you are upon me! Moreover, who knows? My poor Colombine may perhaps revive. She has such a hard head!"

Paul was attracted by the child's face and voice. At the name of "Marthe," he examined her more closely; it was Mme. de Chalonne's daughter.

His first impulse was to return to his lodging, to pack his trunk, which was not large, and to set out as soon as morning dawned. His picture was almost finished, and daily new faces appeared in the town. For a man in search of solitude and of repose, Cauterets was no longer a suitable place.

It was, however, two weeks since Chérancy had exchanged a word with a human being worthy of the name. Since his departure from Paris, he had heard nothing of Nadia. Should he go away without talking for an hour with the Countess de Chalonne, who certainly could give him information? He

sighed, as he recalled the time, so far away, when Mme. Fresnel had been so tyrannically jealous of her cousin and of other women.

"Henceforth," thought he, "I shall not have to suffer from her jealousy."

And he understood how one could regret, at certain moments, that which in times of happiness seemed insupportable.

Guignol took leave of his spectators who cleared the enclosure by passing beneath the ropes. Young Marthe gravely issued from the exit; a maid accompanied her. Suddenly she perceived the artist who had been her friend since she had the honor of posing before him several years ago. She looked at, recognized him in spite of his tourist's dress, and rushed towards him. "You are here? How delightful!" she exclaimed. "How pleased mamma will be."

Already she had seized Chérancy's hand and was dragging him in the opposite direction from the town. They passed the Casino, then they turned to the right into a deserted allée. There, on a bench, shaded by a large tree, sat a lady reading. On account of the keenness of the air, her head and shoulders were enveloped in a scarf of red wool, which singularly heightened her proud beauty.

"Mamma!" cried Marthe, laying her two tiny hands over the reader's dark eyes, "Guess whom I have brought you!" At the sight of Paul the Countess' pale face lighted up with pleasure. She extended her hand to the new comer, with a gesture full of frankness.

“What! you here? . . . By what chance—”

She hesitated and blushed, feeling that she could not complete her sentence. Had M. de Chérancy left Nadia in Paris? Had she gone away? Why had they parted? Or, on the other hand, had they dared to appoint a meeting in the Pyrenees?

“By what chance,” she resumed, to finish her conversation, “did I not see your name on the list of bathers?”

“Because, Madame, I am not a bather, but a poor artist. I arrived before they came and I am now preparing to fly from the elegant cohort. To-morrow at this time, I shall be far away, and without Mlle. Marthe—”

“M. de Chérancy was at Guignol,” explained the child, with the same air of importance with which she would have said: “We met at the exit des Italiens.”

“Indeed, I was at Guignol where the representation was fine. I can assure you that your daughter does not follow in the footsteps of Mme. Seanarelle.”

He detailed the incident and the pleasure he had derived from it.

“My God!” cried Claire. “How fortunate you are to be so young and to be able to find amusement in such trifles!”

“Yet,” he replied, “I never felt less youthful and less inclined for amusement.”

His face, becoming suddenly very gloomy, confirmed that statement. Observing that the Countess was looking at him, in astonishment, he shook off

his sadness and at length asked the question uppermost in his mind.

"Do you know any news from Paris, Madame?" he asked as unconcernedly as possible. "It is two weeks since I have read a newspaper or a letter."

"I do not know any more," replied Claire. "I have read many papers and letters, but among the letters there was none dated from Paris."

To them both, the same name occurred, but they would not have mentioned it for all the gold in the world. "Have they quarreled?" wondered the Countess. "It looks very much that way. Poor Nadia! She dare not tell me." "God knows what has become of her!" thought Paul, greatly troubled. "She no longer writes to her best friend."

The dinner hour drawing near, Mme. de Chalon rose, and all three returned to the town by way of the esplanade des Oeufs.

"I, like you," said the Countess, "fly from people, and had it not been for that child, you would not have found me at Cauterets. But the poor child coughs; she must spend a season here. Twenty-five days of solitude in the midst of the whirl! What a bore!"

"Is there then no one who can be admitted to your secluded home?"

"No one, excepting Lucien Sireuil, our mutual friend, I think."

"Certainly. So Sireuil is here? Where is he stopping?"

"At Hotel de Navarre."

“What would you say were I to go in search of him after dinner, and if I were to ask him to conduct me to your house?”

“Oh, yes, mamma,” exclaimed Marthe, leaping for joy, as the Countess hesitated.

“Do not say no,” insisted Paul. “To-morrow I shall be far away. You need not fear establishing a dangerous precedent.”

“Come, then,” replied Claire.

And Chérancy left her.

At half past eight, the two men rang at the door of the small cottage in which Mme. de Chalonne lived alone with her daughter and two servants. They had conversed on the way, and Paul felt convinced that the lawyer, who had left Paris sometime before him, knew nothing in particular of Mme. Fresnel.

The Countess, very handsome in her elegant gown of white wool, received the two Parisians as intimate friends. At first Marthe's presence gave the conversation a turn suitable to a child of that age. Claire was not one of those mothers who look upon a child as a piece of furniture which is in the way and to be relegated to a corner with a picture book.

She took an interest in her and was pleased to have others notice her, not to pet but to instruct her. When the child had retired, they talked more freely, Sireuil leading the conversation while the others listened to him quietly. Soon his animation subsided.

"I'll wager," said he, after a silence, "that we are all three thinking of the same person, a person at whose house we met the last time we were together: your cousin, dear Madame."

"Indeed!" replied the Countess; "I was thinking of Nadia. Why is she not here? To-morrow I must write to her, for I do not know what has become of her. She will die of ennui in Paris."

"In order to amuse her," said Sireuil, "tell her of the infidelity of one of her admirers: the handsome Roqueservière." At those words, Mme. de Chalonne glanced instinctively at Paul and perceived that he was exceedingly pale.

As no one spoke, Sireuil continued:

"Of course, I was joking; I would not have made that remark did we not all three know what kind of a woman Mme. Fresnel is. But listen to my story and tell me if it is not droll. You know one of the two concerned: Roqueservière."

"And the other?" asked the Countess.

"The other is a *heroine*; I will not mention her name, if you please. I am considerate towards the ladies, especially towards those who will in all probability become my clients some day. You must know that on leaving Paris I went first with a friend to Saint Jean-de-Luz. The spot is charming, but very small, and apartments are hard to obtain. The hotels were so full that the best we could get were in the attic. We took them, for we had to sleep somewhere; the next morning we proposed to leave. The proprietor besought us to remain, prom-

ising us two excellent rooms for the following day ; to be brief, we remained, and while awaiting breakfast we walked upon the beach ; there we saw the heroine whose name my friend whispered to me. A pretty woman, smart, smiling, stylish and of high rank."

"Do I know her?" asked the Countess.

"By name, assuredly, if you subscribe for the '*Sport*.' They introduced me, we conversed. The lady told us that her husband was unable to leave Paris when she left. First she had thought of Biarritz ; but she did not wish to appear at so gay a place alone, while at Saint Jean-de-Luz. Finally a telegram announced the departure of Monsieur that evening. The next morning Madame rejoined him at Bayonne. At the same instant, who fell into my arms, radiant and blooming?"

"Roqueservière?"

"You are right, Madame. That actor pretended not to know the traveler whom I was forced to name to him. How they ridiculed me afterwards! Roqueservière informed me that he was going to leave the next day for Paris."

"What day was it?" asked Paul, who had not uttered a word since the commencement of the story.

"What day? Wait—it was—it was three weeks ago— But I have not finished. The day passed, the evening too, and those two personages remained invisible. The following morning towards noon, madame left in a carriage directly for Bayonne. An

hour afterwards, the Marquis repaired to the station modestly in an omnibus. The door was scarcely closed, when our host said to us: "You shall now be well lodged."

"We hastened to look at our rooms; excellent, indeed, and communicating. That of the Viscountess—"

"Ah! ah! We already know her name;" cried Claire.

"Bah! there is more than one Martin at the fair, and you know nothing at all. The Viscountess' room, I say, contained all the perfumes of Araby. I refused to occupy it, for fear of sick headache. And, oh! wonder of wonders, in Roqueservière's the same perfume as in that of the Viscountess. As soon as my friend and I entered the room we burst out laughing."

"Miserable men! as if the odor could not pass under the door!"

"I fancy, Madame, that it needed not to take so much pains, and that it had only to pass *through* the door with other things probably. The stupids had forgotten to draw the bolts in place on each side, and now, you can imagine how it looked!"

"If I did not know your cousin, I should think that rascal was deceiving her, and that her disappointment would be very great."

Paul could not have told how he returned home that evening, nor in what manner he took leave of Mme. de Chalonne.

Chagrin, disgust, anger, struggled in his mind.

The woman he loved, whom he believed to be endowed with more than ordinary good sense, had allowed herself to become a victim to the insulting stratagem of a *roué*! It was only to make a dupe of her that Roqueservière had fascinated her.

“Ah, woman!” he railed, “ungrateful, frivolous, frail! Angels of our happiness whom a passing breath changes to the demons of our lives! Nadia! Nadia! are you happier now?”

In his bitter rancor, he seated himself at his table to write to the unfaithful woman, and to overwhelm her with her shame, by informing her of what a ruse she had been the victim. But a more noble sentiment gave place to that inclination.

“No!” he cried, throwing aside his pen. “She shall never more hear my voice nor see my writing. When another punishes her, her day of chastisement will come. I have loved her; I have no right to treat her harshly.”

XII.

“CAUTERETS, July 18, 188-.

“MY DEAR NADIA :

“You are the cause of your poor Claire passing the night without closing her eyes; but that would be nothing if I were sure that you slept better than I did. Since yesterday I have wondered if I could, if I should, address this letter to you.

. . . May I be guided by the tender, sisterly affection I have always borne you !

“There is being accomplished in your life, I am certain, something dangerous, something fatal. I am going to release you to-day from a promise which I imposed upon you and which you

gave me. When the house is on fire one does not mind breaking in the doors to save loved ones. Now, I am going to speak to you of *him*.

"I met him here yesterday, by chance. I found him sad, changed, emaciated, longing to question me, but not daring to, because he thinks I know nothing. All that I could gather was that since his departure from Paris he has heard nothing of you. What is there between you? A rupture? My dear, I shall be frank and confess to you that I shall bless that rupture if henceforth you can live by avoiding the slightest shadow of a reproach.

"God is my witness that I speak thus without the slightest intention of judging you or of establishing between us a comparison. Poor friend! I have a daughter to protect me!

"But if that rupture is, on your part, a change and not an end, you may feel assured that you are grieving, vexing, estranging me.

"*One* is too many! *Two*, are as bad as ten!

"Pardon me! I write as if my hair were gray! Ah! God! since to-day I would be satisfied were my hair to turn white, if at that price I could see all those whom I love happy. Prove to me that I did well in writing to you by replying at once, now that I have spoken frankly to you. Until your letter arrives, I shall be very wretched.

Your faithful

CLAIRON.

"PORT BLANC (*Côtes-du-Nord*), July 21, Midnight.

"Ah! yes, you did well. It now seems to me that I am saved. It was time!

"You guessed it; something fatal is taking place. For fifteen days I have struggled along against a powerful adversary. Besides that, I have struggled against words I uttered to him. . . . My God! what shall I do to have you comprehend me?

"How would you interpret 'I love you' uttered to a man when it is not true? Well, I have committed that rash act. Those words I addressed to a being whose strange power possessed me, and do you wish to know with what feelings he inspires me? If I were to hear to-morrow that a malefactor had strangled him at night while he slept, I would fall upon my knees to thank God. That is how I love him.

"I do not love and I never shall love but one man in the world. You have known him a long time, or rather you have not known

him, for I did not know him myself before my madness. I do know whence he obtained his heart, his feelings. Paul is an angel, a God! I hope to die for him some day. Ah! if you should be merciful and kind enough to tell him that. . . Pardon me, I know that it is impossible.

"You do not know *the other one*, at all, though you have seen him at my house. The Marquis de R. is neither an angel nor a God, I assure you! Why does he pursue me? I do not know. He pretends to love me. I think that he loves me, indeed, in his fashion. I even thought, at one time, that I had converted him! We are all the same! When I was obliged, on good proofs, to correct my error, I repulsed him. He disappeared half-furious, half-desperate, for two weeks. If I had been married, I should have cast myself into my husband's arms, asking him to protect me. In certain cases, alas! the being the most cherished can not fill a husband's place."

"On the second of July, my tormentor re-appeared suddenly, not being able to remain far from me very long, he said. I did not expect him. His entrance surprised me. Ah! what an entrance! Imagine a gust of wind bursting open a window, rushing into the room, scattering objects, disarranging draperies, extinguishing lamps. It is confusing. That was what happened to me. I lost my self-possession, and I uttered the fatal words, madly hoping that he would leave me.

"But do not fancy that I gave him anything more. Not a hair of my head. Ah, my God! if I had yielded, there would no longer be the question of a struggle.

"Two hours afterwards, Paul heard my confession. Did he believe me? Did he understand me? He said he did. 'Let us fly together,' said he to me, 'and let us forget.' Alas! why could we not fly at once? But, before leaving, he had to take a short trip into the country on important business.

"He left me for two days, telling me to be ready when he returned. Neither of us thought that I should enter the carriage with another.

"The following day, when R. returned, I allowed him to speak first. My poor Claire, what a lesson for women! That pure, ethereal love, of which he had spoken to me a hundred times, suddenly changed its form. In my heart, I like the pure love the best. I had the strength to tell him that my words of the preceding day were an hallucination, that I did not love him,

that he must give me up, that only one thing remained to be done ; to go away, never to return.

"I feared a scene of despair, for I can not bear the sight of suffering. He was not despondent, but angry. . . Oh, my God ! Has one not the right to pause half-way on an evil course ? Was it for that he called me an unworthy, perverse, despicable creature ?

"But that was not all ! Had you heard his menaces, not against me, but against the man I love. For he guessed that I loved someone. Could I otherwise reject one whom everyone knew to be irresistible ?

"Take care," said he to me, "you will be watched day and night, and if I discover another lover, I shall kill him." I made no reply, but I turned pale, and that was not calculated to allay suspicion. Paul, endangered on my account, by me !

"With difficulty did I plan my flight, knowing that all would be lost if I remained in Paris between those two men. I knew of Port Blanc, a secluded village on the coast of Brittany, for I had spent a week or two there. I chose that refuge ; but, on writing to Paul, to tell him of my sudden departure, I feigned not to know to what place I intended going, fearing that, in spite of my orders to the contrary, he would join me too soon. Two hours later on, I was rolling away.

"In the morning I reached a small station, where I had to exchange my railroad carriage for a miserable diligence. I was on the point of entering it, when Juliette uttered a cry. I turned, the Marquis was at the door, his hat in his hand, bowing to me as to a friend met casually on a journey.

When we were alone in the coach : "I thought," said he, "that I warned you that no one could scorn de Roqueservi re ? So you are bound for the sea shore ? I am, too. I guessed yesterday by your eyes that you anticipated taking a trip. Pardon me for having followed you. I would go to the end of the earth after you." "What can I add ? He is here, living in a sort of cottage a few hundred feet from the house which he rented for me ; for on setting foot in Port Blanc, I was incapable of thinking rationally of anything.

"He comes to see me daily. I threatened to bar my door against him ; he vowed he would force it open, it was his right since I loved him. I swore to him that I loathed him, but he shrugged his shoulders. That man has any amount of confidence

in himself. 'Of what use is it to struggle against your heart?' he asked with a grandiose air. I assure you, said I to him, it will make me ill. 'So much the better,' he replied, 'I will have the pleasure of caring for you.'

"I dare not enter into open war with him, nor yet attempt to fly, and still, each time that he knocks at my door, my heart bounds into my throat. Now he is as distant as a gaoler; now he grows angry and threatens me; sometimes he weeps. At other times he is cynical, and threatens that he will leave me after he has conquered me. The next day, he kisses the hem of my garment, retracts his oath of the preceding day, says that I make him beside himself, that I am avenging all the women who have suffered by his hand. Then he curses the day on which he met me and regrets loving for the first time, on the eve of growing old.

"But that torture is nothing, by the side of that which Paul's silence has caused me. Not once has he written to me. His letters would reach me as your's did. Juliette, my invaluable and devoted maid, has found the means of obtaining them. As for me, I dare not write to Paul. He would appear on the morrow and you can imagine the scene. . . . Or else who knows? Who can tell me if he still loves me, if he is not disgusted with me, vexed with me for my long silence?

"Every day I hope that my tormentor will grow weary, will depart, and that I can rejoin the man I love. Oh! Claire, I dare not confide my humiliation to you. But now that you know it, you will rescue me, will you not? I implore you, I embrace you, I bless you.

NADIA."

Having finished the perusal of her cousin's confession, Claire de Chalonne, seized with a strange suspicion, meditated attentively and compared several dates. Then she took her hat and went out, without losing a moment. Five o'clock struck. She turned toward the Casino, knowing that at that time of the day Lucien Sireuil would be playing *ecarté*. Summoned by a few lines written in pencil, the advocate came down-stairs at once and sought the Countess who was awaiting him impatiently.

"Do you want me?" said he.

"Yes, if you are my friend."

"Your sincere friend, dear Madame, devoted, true, discreet."

"Ah, discreet. That is precisely what I do not want you to be. Do you know what I came to ask you? The name of the person with whom the Marquis de Roqueservière was at Saint Jean-de-Luz."

"The deuce! What a request! See here, if it were you, would you be satisfied for me to speak? And is that what you sent for me for, just when I was about to call ninety?"

"Tell me the name, and return to your game!"

"You would not know it!"

"Indeed, I think of it a great deal. For pity's sake, tell me that name, I beseech of you. I must know it at once."

"Impossible, Madame. Old Sireuil does not do such things. I plead scandalous cases, but I do not help to bring them to light. And then, before the suit there would be a duel. Ah! no, none of that, Lisette! Au revoir, I must leave you! We must fly temptation, above all when the temptress resembles you."

"Listen, M. Sireuil. If you persist in maintaining silence, I swear to you that to-morrow, before noon, I shall be at Saint-Jean-de-Luz."

Lucien Sireuil reflected a moment, then he said to Mme. de Chalonne:

"Ah, ah! I think I understand, and I can now see certain particulars which perplexed me last

night. You wish to enlighten your cousin as to the Marquis' sincerity."

"Yes, and you know very well that your disclosure will remain a secret between us three. Once already you defended Nadia. To-day she must be saved. Now you will no longer refuse to speak!"

"Ah! Accursed Roqueservière! But, Madame, be prudent. I deliver into your keeping the honor, perhaps the life, of Viscountess de Saint-Rieul."

"Rest assured," replied Claire, "her secret will run no risk in my hands. If, at any time, misfortune should come to that woman, I promise you it would not be owing to your revelation."

With those words they separated. The Countess was returning home to write, but on the way she bethought herself of the fact that her letter would take thirty-six hours to reach there. Then, she repaired to the telegraph office, and, after having destroyed several rough copies, some compromising by their clearness, others unintelligible, she sent this despatch to Port Blanc:

"You are being deceived. The journey last month was made on behalf of Mme. de Saint-Rieul. You can take in the situation. The meeting took place at Saint-Jean-de-Luz. We can produce witnesses.

CLAIRE."

PORT BLANC, July 15.

"All is ended. Thanks to you, I am free. . . .

"I was just reading your telegram, the sense of which I gathered without any trouble, when he came in, more tyrannical, more moody than ever.

"I received him by telling him, very coldly, of what I had just learned, without, of course, informing him of the source of my information, or of the name of the lady. My dear, that man, so handsome—for he is, to be sure—became suddenly ugly, very

ugly. He no longer desired to gaze into my eyes as a fascinator. At first he denied, not his trip to Saint-Jean-de-Luz, but the meeting. He pretended that he spent fifteen days in that hole, unhappy, seeing no one. Then, I gave him the name. He grew angry, and accused poor Sireuil of having played the spy. Go ! said I to him. You should have gone long ago.

“ A moment later, he had crossed my threshold !

“ My God, how easy that was ! To think that at times I lost all hope of ever freeing myself from that tyrant of my life. I thought I was riveted to him by one of those terrible compacts which, formerly, bound a soul to the devil. Ah ! I can say it now ! That man held me by fear, pure and simple.

“ Freed ! That was my first thought this morning on awakening, for I slept. It seems to me I could sleep a week without awakening. Or perhaps I am going to be ill ? But what does it matter now ? I am no longer afraid that that demon will nurse me as he had threatened to do. Dear friends, you have saved me. Without you perhaps I should have ended by being vanquished, not by love, but by exhaustion. You know that they conquer lions by keeping them from sleeping, and your poor Nadia is not a lion, especially at this moment !

“ To tell you the truth, I no longer know what I am. The only impression within me is that of a void. My thoughts re-echo in my brain with a sonorousness which makes me uncomfortable. You know what an odd effect the voice produces when you speak in an unfurnished room. To-day I am thinking between four bare walls. There is nothing there ; all is devastated, all is gone ; all can be restored. Is the matter worth the trouble ?

We shall see when my mind and body are rested. At this hour all effort is impossible ; every human being frightens me, and men, without exception, terrify me. You think, perhaps, that I should like to see Paul again ? No, not at this moment. I should have to make explanations, answer questions, exhibit joy, smile. ”

“ I do not feel strong enough. Try to make him understand the miserable condition in which I am. But, above all, don't let him come, not yet. I will remain here until something actuates me to move. Adieu ! I am dying of fatigue ; but I am not unhappy, for I have peace.

NADIA. ”

“PORT BLANC, Aug. 8.

“I have received your letter of July 30. I am better, fortunately, for now I can think, but I assure you, that at certain moments of my life my greatest happiness has been not to think.

“You say that it is not possible for you to speak to Paul, as I asked you to. You are right. How could I have proposed such a thing? Yes, I was absurd. You are too young; you are too much like those beautiful saints, glorious by their virtue, chastely severe, who have only known one love, that of heaven.

“‘Write yourself,’ you tell me. Poor friend! What should I write to that man who has suffered and who has doubted so many times? If he should return? Do I expect him? Am I free? Glorious liberty! Without you, without the advice you gave me when would I have acquired it?

“And if he does not wish to return to me, if he does not wish to believe that nothing separates me from him? Or if he should return to find out that to forget is impossible, that love is dead?

“If only he would speak to you of me! If he only seemed to miss me! But you write me that my name never passes his lips, and that he talks of going away . . . of going farther away from me. Let him go, then! Of what avail is it to struggle against the fatal chance which pursues me? I feel that my life has been ruined by the haughty caprice of a wretched man.

“I shall not forget your birthday, the 13th of August. On that day kiss dear Marthe once more for my sake, and think of the kisses which you showered upon me when I was, like her, a child, happy, innocent and guarded by the best of mothers.

NADIA.”

XIII.

Two weeks had flown since Paul had announced his intended departure; he had not gone, and he no longer talked of going.

It was not that he was happy at Cauterets, but he knew that he would be more unhappy elsewhere.

He had, in that crisis of his life, chanced upon a provisional peace.

Without considering the morrow, the future, he enjoyed that comparative calm. Moreover, work, lasting the best part of the day, prevented him from thinking. In the evening, from force of habit, which seemed to him quite natural, he found himself at Mme. de Chalonne's.

The old lawyer, Sireuil, by that time knew the whole story of Mme. Fresnel, Chérancy and Roqueservière. Half of it had been told him, he had divined the rest, still more easily, since for some time he had suspected the truth.

He, too, sacrificing all the other pleasures of the gay watering place, repaired every evening to the Countess', knowing that without the presence of a chaperon like him Paul would not have the door open to him so regularly. Perhaps a feeling of sympathetic pity for a man in love, bearing his suffering bravely, was joined in Sireuil with that crude dilettantism of human life which led him, when in Paris, into the most widely different circles.

As for Mme. de Chalonne, she felt as if she were obeying a sentiment of justice, a desire to make reparation for a wound inflicted by one of her kin. In her breast, she felt for Chérancy an admiration bordering on enthusiasm. She watched him suffer curiously, surprised that he had the strength not to complain, not to accuse anyone by an allusion in any way bitter.

For the first time in her life she could measure

the puissance of love by its terrible effects. Love, like war, alas!—can not be understood through the recitals of the historian, nor the strophes of poets. The ruins, the tears, the anguish caused must be viewed. On Paul's brow and in Nadia's letters, Claire could easily perceive them.

“Great God!” thought she, “those two beings are living, nothing hinders them from belonging one to the other, and yet their hearts are torn by tortures which the death of the best of men did not cause me!”

More than once she had been on the point of yielding to pity and of undertaking to bring together those two miserable existences.

But, setting aside the scruples of her severe conscience and the modesty of her sentiments, she thought she was acting in the interests of both parties by not precipitating matters. She wished Paul to meet again a happy woman, charmed to see him, staunch in her loyalty, and not a weak, trembling, sickly woman. Meanwhile those evenings spent at Mme. de Chalonne's gave to Paul one of those benefits which he had lost, and the loss of which he felt the most—intimacy. He bore more bravely, in expectation of that soothing hour, the trials of the day, the dreams of his sleepless nights. He was astonished himself at the balm cast by the soft hand of a woman over the wound which another woman had inflicted, and each day a little less happy, a little more grateful, he came to seek the healing balm. What would become of him were he to find

the door closed? He tried not to think of it. The word 'departure,' was never uttered.

One evening at the Countess', he noticed the extraordinary excitement of little Marthe who had become more and more attached to him. The child laughed as she looked at him, ran from her mother to Lucien Sireuil, and spoke to him in a low voice. When she followed her nurse to bed, she kissed Paul her eyes beaming with joy.

"Until to-morrow!" said she to him in a tone full of promise.

The following day, somewhat before noon, the painter was working as usual, that is to say, *furiously*. For some time he had abandoned the Lake de Gaube, infested with pseudo tourists, and had taken refuge, with his umbrella and his canvas, about half an hour's walk from the Pont d'Espagne, the limit of the excursions of the 'vulgar herd.'

As he was interested in his study, the dull sound of horses' hoofs on the velvety grass caused him to raise his head. He frowned, not at all charmed at the approach of the cavalcade which came to interrupt his solitude. First appeared, his whip slung over his shoulder, one of those opera-comic guides, peculiar to the Pyrenees, incapable of walking a league and of finding their way in the mountains, outside of the beaten track followed daily by their hired beasts. Then, came a cavalier, less startling by his boldness than by his inexperience; then, a young lady with a queenly carriage, and an Amazon of ten, galloping ahead.

"Well," she exclaimed, "I hope that you are surprised? You did not expect us. But that is not all; we invite you to lunch. We have brought a lot of goodies. You will see!" The Countess de Chaulonne and Sireuil came up in their turn. The former, with Paul's assistance, leaped lightly to the ground. The latter was aided by the guide's strong arm.

Animated by her horse's pace and by the bracing air, Claire was wonderfully pretty and seemed remarkably youthful. She, too, appeared happy in the happiness of her daughter, whose health improved from day to day.

While Sireuil, aided by Marthe, busied himself in choosing a spot in which to dispose the repast, Chérancy showed the Countess his painting which was well-nigh completed. Claire was one of those rare women, capable of conversing on the subject of Art, without ever in her life having touched a pencil. She had seen many excellent pictures, had listened to many celebrated artists and weighed their judgment, instead of wishing to surprise them by hers, as is so common with pretty women, prompt to believe that they know and can do everything. In a few phrases, in which discreet praise was couched, she afforded Paul a pleasure which he had not experienced for a long time, and which Nadia had never afforded him: That of hearing art handled competently.

"You have given," said he, his face lighting up with pleasure "to these grandiose beauties the only thing lacking—a voice."

He might have added that she had given him an appetite, for he did honor to the cold viands.

"Are we not having a fine time?" cried Marthe, in raptures. "This was my idea. But this is not all. At dessert there will be another surprise."

As she spoke, she glanced slyly at a mysterious package, with regard to which the Countess feigned the most perfect indifference. The time arrived, the package opened, disclosed a bottle of Moët and a bunch of roses which the child offered to her mother as she clasped her arms around her neck.

"Oh! what pretty flowers!" said the Countess. "But why? Is it my birthday? Yes, indeed; Saint-Claire's-day falls on to-morrow. And you remembered it, darling?"

Lucien Sireuil presented her with a bunch of violets, and, glass in hand, proposed a toast as neatly turned as if he had an audience of fifty persons.

Paul, somewhat out of his element in the midst of that joy, looked on, awaiting his turn to speak. When the glasses were emptied, he rose, gathered a wild rhododendron from a bush near by, and approaching Claire, said:

"It is the offering of a poor man, but of a poor man sincerely, eternally grateful to his benefactress."

He was deeply moved and everyone could see the tears sparkling in his eyes. Though Mme. de Chaulonne extended her hand without replying, she was none the less agitated.

Little Marthe sprang up and without consideration

for Sireuil's *embonpoint*, dragged him to a slope near by.

"When mamma is sad," she whispered to her companion, "she likes to be left alone. M. de Chéraney will not annoy her, for he is sad, too."

Left alone, beneath the shade of the old pine tree on the green turf, those two sorrowful people watched the water flow, water so transparent that it might have been taken for liquid air. Paul could have remained there for hours. As for the Countess, it could easily be seen that she had something to say, something difficult, and that she was seeking an exordium. Forcing her voice to its very softest accent, Claire, after a silence, spoke thus :

"Just now you said that I was charitable, and I accept the word. You understand why, notwithstanding my tastes and my duty, I opened my door to you as I have done. Do not let us resume this subject to-day, or ever. Now my task is accomplished, and I am rejoiced to think that you have no longer need of me, at the moment when my role of Sister of Charity was about to become very difficult. On our way hither, my old friend Sireuil, informed me that he is going away to-morrow."

Paul started, sighed, bowed his head.

"And you can not receive me when he is gone?" he asked. "That is what you have to tell me. It is true. I have never heard issue from your lips one word which was not true, just and good. Well, I shall go away, then, too. Three weeks of my misery have been whiled away at any rate."

"That feeling will soon give place to one of happiness."

"That is the secret of the future, and of my destiny. One thing is certain, but it was foreseen; I must go away. My plans are already made. If you will permit, we will return to the village together. There are still two hours to spend with you. Who knows when I shall have that pleasure again?"

"And your painting apparatus?" said Mme. de Chalonne, without replying.

"I shall leave everything at the inn of the Pont d'Espagne where your horses are, for I shall come up again this evening, when my affairs are arranged in town. To-morrow, at daybreak, I shall be upon the watch on the road, and the first Spanish mountaineers returning home, will serve as guides for me, as porters for my luggage."

"What!" exclaimed Claire, "You are going to Spain!"

"Yes, to the baths of Panticosa. It seems that it is an excellent site. Why do you look at me with so singular an air?"

"Because you should not go to Panticosa, but to Paris. You will find there a person whom I love as a sister, who merits all the devotion of which your heart is capable, and who can not be happy without you."

A shadow flitted over Paul's features. He slowly raised his head, and, his eyes fixed upon Mme. de Chalonne, he asked:

“What do you mean?”

“One thing only; that you must return to Paris. M. de Chérancy, you know me. To save my own life, I would not advise you to do that which the most delicate honor—Ah! God! can you not understand me? There are things which I can not tell, which I do not even know.”

“That is true,” said Paul.

Then after a pause:

“I only understand you in part, but I believe you to be loyalty itself; only I expected so little. . . . I thought that I was forgotten; I tried to forget—to forget, too. . . . What a shock your words caused me! It is necessary for me to collect myself, to question myself. No, indeed, I could not return like this, so soon. . . . to the place you speak of.”

Claire, at that moment, thought that Chérancy spoke very sensibly. Undoubtedly she would have rejoiced for Nadia's sake to see him rush away, forgetting everything, like the exile to whom the doors of his country are again opened. But, since he saw the matter in a different light, she could not help approving of his views. She was pleased to see that the sick man cared for by her was not too easily cured of his malady.

She took pleasure, too, a peculiar pleasure, in examining absently the flower which Chérancy had offered her with such affecting words.

The day was glorious. The sun shone brightly, and through the dark branches of the pines came a thousand odors, while the fresh breeze from the

summits of the heights fanned the brow caressingly. In the distance could be heard the symphonies of the cascades. But at the feet of that man and that woman, suffering, reasoning, struggling, bidding one another farewell for a long time, perhaps forever, could be heard a sound like the laughter of an incredulous old man. It was the streamlet which flowed through the prairie over the pebbles, barely covered by the limpid water.

Undoubtedly the young man heard that mocking laugh. She started, her handsome face colored more warmly, her fingers unclasped. The little flower, seized by the wind, was blown towards the foaming falls, where the large trees themselves were broken. And still the streamlet gurgled.

Paul, seeing the small red flower disappear, said in a whisper, as if talking to himself :

“It will reach Cauterets quicker than we shall ?”

“Yes,” replied Mme. de Chalonne gravely. “It will follow the road it should follow, lucky or unlucky, what does it matter? M. de Chérancy, do as that flower does! Follow your road, listen to your duty. Go to Paris.”

She spoke in a nervous voice, with a sort of irritation, for if that departure seemed to her a natural thing, just, necessary, she still felt a secret displeasure at being obliged to sign, herself, Chérancy’s passport.

“Not at once,” he replied again. “At this moment, I could not.”

“Why,” insisted the Countess? “Nothing

hinders you from returning to Paris immediately. I say *nothing*. Do you hear me?"

"Nothing!" he exclaimed. "Nothing apart from me, that is possible. But within me! Do you know what wounds treason, ingratitude, injustice, even unconscious, but caused by weakness, make in the heart?"

"If they are wept for, expiated, made amends for?" Claire de Chalonne could say no more. Marthe ran towards them, carrying in her red fingers a ball of half-melted snow.

"How comical this is!" cried she from afar, to Chérancy. "Snow in the month of August, and so cold! Only see!" Paul, without a word, took the piece of ice and passed it slowly over his brow and his burning temples.

An hour later the cavalcade, together with a pedestrian, passed the Pont d'Espagne, and descended towards the town. Paul, when the road permitted, walked beside the Countess' horse. He had announced his departure, and his sadness had affected every one. The descent was made almost in silence.

Arrived at La Raillière, Paul said:

"Adieu, Madame. Our roads branch off here. God knows when they will meet again! To-morrow, when you awake, think of the traveler who is crossing the mountain."

"So you have decided. You are going up there?"

As he made a gesture in the affirmative:

"Here," said she, with a sudden resolution, drawing from her pocket the last letter from her cousin;

"take this, and read it. Perhaps you will change your mind."

When Paul was alone, he glanced, as he walked, at the lines in a handwriting which he had not seen for so long a time.

His emotion was great; in his heart struggled conflicting resolutions. But, when he reached his lodging, when he again saw that room in which he had spent so many sleepless nights, *the man* rose above that which poor Nadia called *the angel*. He sank into an easy-chair, and burying his face in his hands, he moaned:

"I can not, yet. God is my witness that I should like to. But I can not!" . . .

In the evening, overcome by mental and physical fatigue, he reappeared at his inn. After an interminable night, dawn permitted him to leave his bed. An hour later, the porters of Panticosa divided his light luggage, and he started out with them. Before noon, his feet trod upon the snow in the pass of Marcadau, eight thousand feet above the level, and he began to descend the desolate slopes on the Spanish side.

At almost the same time, Lucien Sireuil left Caunterets. In the evening at ten o'clock, as Claire de Chalonne sat alone, a man in rags, the true type of a bandit, rapped, out of breath, at her door. Claire, on hearing her maid's cry, rushed to the door; the maid, a Parisian unaccustomed to visitors so poorly-clad, was trying vainly to understand the stranger. But in his explanation, made in a kind of *patois*, one

word recurred constantly : *Panticosa*. At the same time, he held a letter through the bars. Seized with a dire presentiment of evil, Claire took the letter and hastened toward the lamp in order to read it, not before she had told the maid to admit the messenger and to see that he was well treated.

"Madame is afraid of nothing," said the soubrette to her companion. "Nevertheless, I have not seen her more moved since the evening on which I gave her the dispatch announcing the illness of my late master." Meanwhile Claire de Chalonne read the following:

"BATHS OF PANTICOSA, Aug. 14, 188—, 5 P. M.

"*Mme. la Comtesse* :

"Two men connected with our establishment have just arrived from France, accompanying a traveler who took them as guides this morning at the Pont d'Espagne. That stranger, who, so say his companions, showed symptoms of great exhaustion towards the end of his journey, fainted on entering my office, without having been able to utter a word.

"It was my duty to seek for some sign enabling me to inform his family of a situation which might prove to be serious. I only found upon him one letter, the address of which I have reproduced upon mine, leaving you to decide what shall be done. Our unknown guest has not regained consciousness. He is attended with all the zeal possible by two physicians; whose diagnosis of the case is not yet final. The messenger whom I have sent to you, so as not to lose a minute, has orders to return with all possible speed, notwithstanding the night and the difficulties of the journey.

I am, Madame, respectfully

Your devoted servant,

CANDAÜ."

(Administrator of the Baths).

XIV.

“He is lost!” said the Countess to herself.” Unhappy Nadia! Your hand has killed him!”

Then, remembering the conversation of the preceding day on the mountain, and the circumstances under which Paul’s departure had taken place, she thought:

“Am I not rather to be blamed? Could I not, by keeping him here several days longer, have reasoned with him, have calmed him, have cured that fever of body and of mind which smouldered within him, and beneath which he succumbed? Had I the right to make him leave, by one word, the retreat he had found in his sorrow? Was his departure so very urgent? Alas! what misfortune will it bring about?”

She no longer admired herself, as she had the preceding day, for her noble severity.

At that moment she saw in her conduct the exaggeration of selfish and false scruples. But, above all, she saw the unfortunate Paul lying, dead perhaps, in his bed at an inn on the other side of those mountains which she could almost touch with her hand.

Five hours only to go to him!

That thought did not leave her, as she crushed between her fingers the letter just delivered to her, asking what was to be done. For something must be done. Should she telegraph? To whom? To Nadia? It would be barbarous; it was impossible.

To Paul's family? He had said in her presence twenty times that his family consisted only of distant relatives. Besides, she did not know their address.

Five hours! Half a day on a mule to do an act of justice, of kindness. Had she not often faced longer journeys for pleasure? And, as she hesitated thus, she fancied she could hear a faint voice calling her. With a shudder, she glanced at the clock, thinking that she had been dreaming for hours. It was only five minutes since the Spaniard had knocked at her door.

"Well, it is duty," said she. I must not hesitate. At daybreak we shall be on the way."

Then, already calmed, she planned the expedition for the following day. First of all, she sent for the guide who usually escorted her, and who was to be found without any trouble at a neighboring café.

"Horses for myself, my daughter and my maid," she commanded. "We will set out at daybreak."

But, on learning that Panticosa was to be reached by crossing the mountain directly, the man raised his arms toward Heaven.

"Cross the Marcadau on horseback!" cried he. "Madame has not considered it! Only mules can cross there; but I defy the ladies to keep their seats even on them, on certain parts of the road."

Claire, at that unexpected obstacle, felt her remorse and anguish redouble.

"But," she moaned; "there is no easier road."

"By rising early, Madame can reach Pau, then

Laruns by railroad in the morning. There, a carriage will take you through the Eaux-Chaudes and Gabas to Lourdes, a spot at which terminates the coaching road. You will, however, find mules there which will take you to Sallent, in Spain ; one of the best passes in the Pyrenees. At Sallent, you will take a carriage again, and by dawn you will reach the baths of Panticosa."

"Very well," said Claire. "I will follow that route." On the stroke of eleven, the Spanish messenger, well fed and well paid, started out again across the precipices, as calmly as a citizen would cross a bridge to return home after having dined in town. As for Mme. de Chalonne, she had no trouble in rising early, for the excellent reason that she did not retire. She spent the time in thinking, in preparing some light luggage for her daughter and herself and in writing out telegrams informing Nadia of what had taken place. Upon reflection, she sent none of them. It would be wiser to wait a few hours longer, and to give more exact details.

Day had dawned when she awoke Marthe and told her her plans for the day.

"Let us go quickly!" cried the child. "Poor M. de Chérancy! Very ill, you say? And all alone! How sad that is!"

To tell the truth, that great sadness diminished when Marthe found out that she would have to make part of the journey on horseback. Mother and daughter set out at five o'clock, accompanied by a maid. At Pierrefitte, they exchanged the dili-

gence for the carriage. At Lourdes, then at Pau, they took the car. At Laruns, another change to a carriage. At about three o'clock in the afternoon, in admirable weather, the travelers, mounted upon stout mules, crossed the walls which separated France from Spain.

The worst was over. Three or four hours at the most, and Claire would know if her ride had been for naught.

For the first time a reaction took place within her; she began to think of all that was inconsiderate in her enterprise. She pictured herself arriving at Panticosa, exposed to the gaze of all those strangers whose glances would ask:

"Who is the sick man to whom you have come from such a distance? Your husband or your brother?"

The shock caused by that reflection was so sudden that Claire mechanically pulled the rein of her bridle. The animal stopped short.

"Ah, my God! Who can advise me?" thought she. No one in that stony desert, as bare, as desolate as a landscape in Palestine. At a distance, on the very summit of the slopes, innumerable herds of sheep were browsing. Lower down, more easily to be seen, hundreds of mules, resembling large, red ants, were nibbling the grass or sleeping, stretched idly in the sun. On the approach of the riders, flocks of crows, with sinister cries, flew away to some spot further on. A Roman of the time of Virgil would have found there more than one lugu-

brious omen. Never had Claire de Chalonne felt so alone, so hesitating, so troubled. She called her daughter, who was handing her muleteer her silver cup to fill at a brook near by.

“Marthe,” she asked, “are you not tired? Would you not like to return to Caunterets?”

She awaited the child’s reply, as she would that of an oracle, swearing to obey it. The girl glanced at her mother in surprise.

“Oh! mamma! He is all alone, and ill! On the contrary let us go quickly.”

It was not the last time that the child was to have a decisive influence on the destiny of her mother and of Paul de Chérancy.

At six o’clock in the evening Claire and her suite could distinguish the slate roofs of the pretty village of Panticosa. The road leading to the baths had begun eight kilometers on foot; five hundred meters to climb to the amphitheater of the mountains. That was what Mme. de Chalonne heard with affright, when the horses paused to take breath before the *posada* at the foot of the hills. Still one hour before receiving the reply to that question which, since the day before, was buried in her heart like a gimlet—“Was he dead?”

At the moment they entered the gorge, Claire felt as if she were entering a new world. On the pathway an enormous boulder cast its shadow; beyond there was no trace of sun-light. It was like the frontier of the realm of the unknown. Other rays of light, other sentiments, other laws seemed

to guide the mortal who ventured into that erebus of the air. Mme. de Chalonne, at that moment, closed her eyes with the feeling that she was passing beneath a new power. Suddenly the thunder of the mountains with its claps and its battle-roar was heard. But the anguish which possessed Claire had no connection with the storm. Not only did she feel that she should not be happy a moment of her life if she found Chérancy dead, but she felt as if she were bringing with her the cure for the sick man. She was the messenger of mercy dispatched to the innocent man, already on the road to punishment. Oh! punishment for herself! the fear of arriving one hour, one minute, or one second too late.

She had promised her coachman to double the fare; he lashed his whip and urged his panting horses on. Claire's excitement, too, was intense. She cursed the wheels, which did not turn fast enough, the holes in the road, which constantly set back the horses.

They were four thousand feet above the level; the air became chilly. In vain did the maid arrange the robes over her mistress' knees. Claire mechanically pushed them aside. She longed to leave the carriage and follow the mountaineers who passed her. A white house appeared on the summit of the gorge. At length! There it was! An other quarter of an hour and the uncertainty would cease. Alas! to be replaced by some truth more cruel! The landscape became indistinct; the mist grew thicker.

A peak, half-veiled, rose darkly against the sky ; upon its cone were scattered patches of snow, and Claire shuddered, fancying she saw silver tears on the sombre drapery of a catafalque.

The white house drew nearer ; it was reached. It was only a building constructed for the road laborers. Beyond, still more snares ; suddenly the road seemed to disappear.

“ My God ! ” exclaimed the Countess, aloud. “ We shall never reach there ! ”

The sound of her own voice awoke her as if from a dream. She asked herself if that was indeed Claire de Chalonne, who was crossing the mountains for fourteen hours in order to reach the death-bed of a sick stranger. A stranger ! Was Paul de Chérancy anything else to her ?

Far from calming her, that thought irritated her against herself, so that her eyes flamed. Yes, it was a stranger to whom she was going. She repeated it to herself twice with so much energy that her lips moved. She interrogated herself in order to find out what she would think of another woman performing a similar act. The day before, undoubtedly, she would have called it madness. But she had no longer her opinions, her fears, her scruples of the preceding day. To arrive in time, that was her one thought ! What mattered the rest to her at that hour ?

The road took one last turn. The horses trotted on under a cold rain. They crossed a white marble bridge ; they turned a second time, and suddenly,

at the extremity of a small lake with inky waters, appeared an enclosure with buildings whose outlines bespoke a hospital or barracks.

That was it. Claire heaved a sigh. The hour had come for knowing all. Several revolutions of the wheels, several cracks of the whip and the carriage drew up before a *perron*.

Marthe, tired from the long journey, sprang to the ground. Before alighting, the Countess, addressing a serving-woman, who advanced, asked :

“M. de Chérancy? How is he? Where is he?”

No reply, but a smile which disclosed the maid's white teeth. Large black eyes gazed at her without comprehending:

“*No intiendo, Señora.*”

Other servants hastened up; men unloaded the light luggage, and Claire repeated her question. The only reply received were curious glances. A Frenchwoman at Panticosa! What a rare event. Meanwhile, the young lady exhausted from excitement and fatigue, drenched by the rain which was falling in torrents, could scarcely restrain her tears. She glanced supplicatingly at those around her; her lips repeated one word, which the entire universe should understand:

“Chérancy! Chérancy!”

She gazed in despair at the interminable buildings; at each window. Where was he? Where was his poor, sick body, if he were still alive? Where his corpse, if dead?

Thank God, some one uttered a French sentence!

"Have I the honor of addressing the Countess de Chalonne?" asked a short, stout man, with a heavy moustache and an energetic face.

At a gesture in the affirmative, he continued :

"Will you follow me, Madame? Your arrival relieves me of a terrible responsibility. The sick man's condition has not changed since I wrote to you. I have cared for him not only as a host, but as a compatriot. For I am a Frenchman, Madame."

Claire, the ungrateful woman, only comprehended one thing: it was that she had arrived in time. She was sure that from that time forth all would go well, and the simple thought that the stranger would owe his recovery to her, almost caused her to swoon in the presence of one of the greatest joys of her life.

XV.

In a large, bare chamber, simply but scrupulously neat, beneath gaudy curtains of printed muslin, Paul de Chérancy lay asleep. His sleep was uneasy, to judge by the irregular breathing, by the convulsive movements which did not permit his limbs to relax. Claire, holding her daughter's hand, approached the iron bed. Night was falling. That eagle's nest, on the longest summer days, received no sun after five o'clock. A small, soft, white hand sought Paul's brow and rested there, while Marthe, her eyes fixed upon her mother, watched her least

sign as she would have watched the most capable physician. At the touch, which cooled his burning skin, Chérancy became calm, almost immediately. His fingers groped about, until they met the Countess' other hand. Then, without opening his eyes, he murmured in a voice as faint as a sigh :

“ You——You——Happiness !—Thanks.”

Slowly two tears escaped from beneath his heavy eyelids and fell upon his brown beard. Marthe, in a transport, as if at the sight of a miracle, said very softly :

“ Oh, mamma ! He has recognized you ! We have done well to come ! We shall remain, shall we not mamma ? ” The child paused, perceiving that her mother was weeping.

“ How good you are,” she whispered, passing her tiny arm around Claire's waist. “ He will get well, I promise you. We will nurse him so carefully.”

“ Mme. de Chalonne did not reply. That which occupied her at that moment was not the question “ Will the sick man recover ? ” but, “ has he recognized me ? Does he know that he is speaking to me ? Is he thanking me . . . or Nadia ? ”

An hour later, Claire and her daughter dined hastily at a separate table in the long dining-room, with the pine floor resembling a refectory. When the little girl was in bed, and ready to go to sleep in the room adjoining her mother's, the Countess returned to the invalid at the other end of the immense corridor. She found the doctor there ; he declared the symptoms to be more reassuring.

“Still,” said he, “I can give no decided opinion yet. We have, alas, only too many anxieties! I must confess there is a grave condition of the spine, and, on the other hand, I fear inflammation of the lungs. During the entire night, the second which she had spent by his bed-side, Claire nursed the sick man with the assiduity of a Sister of Mercy. But the order of the daughters of Saint-Vincent de Paul would soon be diminished in numbers, if their hearts all beat as rapidly beneath their gowns for their patients, as did that of Madame de Chalonne beneath her elegant corsage. She had not that resignation which, duty accomplished, bows before the sovereign will. In vain she said to herself:

“Does not that life for which I am contending with death belong to another?”

She felt her own happiness, her personal interests, at stake in the struggle she was undertaking. At first, she was startled by it; then, in that austere and silent solitude, by the uncertain light of the flickering lamp, she saw in her heart certain forms, until then confused, gradually reveal their contour. Soon a brilliant jet of implacable truth flooded her soul. It became impossible for her to stop the progress of her destiny.

“Alas!” sighed she; “I am condemned to suffer forever. For, were he to die, what would my life be? And yet, if he convalesces he will belong to another . . . !” She rose in affright, for, by the side of her sorrow, she perceived something, up

to that time ignored, a redoubtable struggle against herself.

“Good Lord,” she prayed; “only let him get well, and my blood, my tears shall flow before a human being suspects my secret.”

Very soon her fear disappeared, for that valiant heart felt itself to be invincible and strong, like a soldier who reaches an unexpected ambush! Oh! yes, an ambush! She had walked for several days in ignorance and in darkness, and suddenly she awoke far, far away, in a strange land, where, of her free will, she would never have suffered herself to be led.

Ah! If it were to be done over again!

She paused, for she was loyal, even in the depths of her thoughts. She regretted nothing, and if, during the remainder of her life, she could say that she had saved that other life, the suffering, the struggle, would be her reward, her happiness.

When the sun reappeared, she drew near the window and fancied she was reawakening from a dream, a thousand leagues from the persons and things she had always known. As far as she could see, her eyes only perceived a gray wall crowned by miserable pines. Already, in the court, the matutinal population of bathers, all Spanish, were moving about. Men, whose eyes alone appeared between their black felt hats and the capes thrown over their shoulders, walked along with rapid strides. Upon the granite staircases, along the paths cut beside the rocks, shadows moved silently towards the tap-rooms scattered among the mountains.

Suddenly, on the road which ran beside the small lake with the black waters, a noise was heard. It was a diligence of antique form, arriving with a great deal of bustle, drawn by a long file of mules harnessed two and two. Three men, three whips, three rough voices made them gallop along. The coachman, majestic upon his seat, assumed the important air of a captain doubling the cape. The mounted postilion at the head of the column, cracked his whip like a fine cavalier. L'adeltando, hanging to the foot-board, hurled curses at the quadrupeds. When he ceased, the ten beasts stopped too.

Exhausted by the twenty-four hour's ride from Huesca, the nearest station, the travellers descended. Then, beneath the eyes of the royal riflemen in their elegant costumes, the officials unloaded sacks of dispatches, and that sight reminded the Countess that she should write a letter. Should she not warn Nadia? Alas! What news should she give her? Just at that moment, the doctor came to pay his morning visit.

"No better," said he, "but there is less excitement. That is probably the best of symptoms. The patient is calmer; he no longer feels that he is alone. Madame, permit me to tell you that your—your—"

"My friend," said Claire simply.

"That your friend, if we save him, and I hope we shall, will owe his life to you. Between a faithful nurse, not speaking a word of French, and a nurse

like you, what a difference! We shall keep you some time, I hope."

"No; but I shall soon be replaced by some one better."

The doctor gone, Claire wrote her letter, confining herself to a prompt recital, and making no comments on events.

"You know why I came," said she, in conclusion; "you would have done the same in my place. If I had telegraphed to you, you would have been at Bordeaux, at the most, by this time. You could not have crossed the mountains in the night. By coming, I gained almost two days. Moreover, it would have been cruel to have exposed you to the risk of finding him dead. I had not the courage. Now everything assures me that you will find him alive. At any rate, you will find me here."

"Is it really I writing you to come as a very simple thing? I do not know myself. But at such a time, conscience must not be questioned. That man must be saved. I have commenced: you will finish. Come."

Claire, somewhat calmer, slept two hours. Her maid, a serious and faithful person, took her place beside the invalid. Toward evening, Paul aroused somewhat from his lethargy; Mme. de Chalonne was there. He took her hand, kissed it, and murmured again: "Thank you, Madame!"

"He has recognized me," thought Claire. "If he dies, he will carry that souvenir with him."

In the evening Paul was declared out of danger

of all cerebral fever. There still remained all the symptoms of pneumonia, and a fever which reduced the sick man greatly.

Another day passed; the time came when Nadia should receive her cousin's letter. From that moment Claire's eyes were fixed upon the door of the telegraph office. To her great surprise the wire did not respond.

What could be the cause of that silence? Was the letter lost? Had Mme. Fresnel taken the train without thinking of sending a dispatch? Was she vexed with her relative for having usurped her place? Mme. de Chalonne trembled with sorrow and shame at that thought, and yet she did not regret having acted as she had. But why did that man, from whom she desired, expected, hoped for nothing, trouble her life thus?

She must be resigned and wait.

Fortunately, in that place, filled with guests—all strangers—no one paid any heed to the newcomer. Ladies were rare, the majority of them of modest rank. They knew in the establishment that a Frenchwoman was at Panticosa to nurse a traveler—a relative, no doubt, in danger of death. They prayed that he might recover, or, at least, that he would have sufficient strength to die elsewhere—the place was already dull enough. As for romantic surmises, the presence of little Marthe, constantly by her mother's side, rendered them impossible.

In that pure atmosphere of one of the highest elevations in Europe, the child's health improved

wonderfully. It even happened that she could continue the treatment begun at Cauterets, certain springs at Panticosa being analogous. In short, nothing hastened Mme. de Chalonne's departure, and everything bade her remain—everything, even a secret voice which she alone heard.

The fifth day after her arrival in the mountains of Aragon, she received, to her great surprise, a letter from Nadia; a letter with a black border and dated from Paris. "I now understand," said her cousin, "why you did not reply to my letter, which informed you of a serious event: M. Fresnel is dead.

"The mail which carried the news to you, passed you on the way: but if the news is fresh, the catastrophe is not. It was at Chicago, at the beginning of January that my husband died, I know not how. Perhaps others know; but they did not think it well to tell me, and you know I shall not inquire. As for the delay in informing me, his family, who treat me as a stranger, made no explanation. Poor man! he had changed his name and, no doubt, often his residence. How did he die?

"I pardon him all; but my God, why did I not know in January what I learned seven months later? Why did the news of my deliverance take so long to reach me? Of what use will that liberty be to me henceforth? My poor Paul is dying, is dead. Or he no longer wants me! You will see! I feel that fatality, that *too late* which attaches itself to lost causes! I am calm to-day, it is the calmness of prostration. But there are six days.

“Burn without reading it my last letter which is at Cauterets. It is the blasphemy of a pagan against Fate.

“For the time being all that I gain by my widowhood is not to be able to care for the man to whom I have given myself.

“Would you go at the risk of seeming to reclaim an expired debt? However, if it is *certain* that he is lost, nothing would prevent me from setting out and coming to see him die. My journey would then not seem interested, suspicious. So telegraph me, and pity me; pity me if I do not come, and pity me more if I do. They say that misfortunes never come singly. Ah, my heart no longer beats!

“As soon as the intelligence arrived, I returned to Paris. It was necessary, if only to buy my black gown. And then I had business to attend to; business! Is it not a horrible word to utter at this moment? If you knew, as I know, the irony of my destiny.

“One thing only tortures me. It is to think that he may die with the thought that I am an unworthy creature. If you have any pity for my misery, deliver me from that great sorrow, for the time left me to live. Shall he forget me as an evil-doer. Forget me! Alas! the priest will require him to forget me! But, at least, may he pardon me, and may he know that I have not betrayed him. No, I have not deceived him; Claire, swear it to him on the Host, and speak to him of me as of an unfortunate, who owes to him her only moments of happiness, and

who loves him, loves him, oh, my God how I love him ! And this is the way in which we are to part forever. Adieu ; I can write no more."

Less than five minutes after Mme. de Chalonne had finished the perusal of that letter—with what a troubled heart!—the telegrapher forwarded this response : "He is better. I will advise you when to come. Rely upon your sister and your God."

XVI.

It was the eighth day of Paul's illness.

All danger had disappeared, but his weakness was very great. More assiduous, more calm than ever, apparently, but paler, Claire de Chalonne awaited the moment when the convalescent could be informed without any danger of the news.

With the latter the mind had not recovered as rapidly as the body. It seemed as if his patience, his energy, his puissant will had given way at the same time as his muscles. That man, once so strong, was as incapable as a child when it came to deciding or acting for himself; being towards her who waited upon him submissive, tender and tyrannical. As, during the early stages of his illness he had refused medicine from any other hand than that of Claire, so, the danger past, he required that she should be there to hold the first food to his pallid lips.

He seldom spoke, thanking her merely with his eyes, which had grown immense; at times with a

a timid kiss upon the tips of the fingers of his pretty nurse.

The time dragged slowly by in that anarchy of habits which succeeds the restoration to health. More day, more night, more moments regulated by nourishment and rest. On his wakeful nights he could not tell if the lamp was burning or if the rays of the sun glinted through the shades into his room.

But he always knew if Mme. de Chalonne was there, if she was absent. The presence or absence of that fairy with the sweet smile alone marked the two great divisions of time—the day and the night—of his existence, now restless, now peaceful, according as the easy chair which Claire occupied was filled or vacant. She had become the sunshine of his life, and if we can believe the wise men, the worship of the sun is the most natural of idolatries.

As for the Countess, from moment to moment, the convalescent gained more and more of her heart. She no longer thought of sustaining that useless struggle against herself, but only of concealing her weakness from the eyes of others. One day she said to Paul, who was gazing at her with emotion :

“How true it is that every woman is a born Sister of Charity! Would you believe that it now seems quite natural for me to nurse, as my brother, the friend of yesterday?”

“That means,” said he sadly, “that you would have done as much for any other person in my place.”

She started, reflected a second, and with the

intrepidity of a woman who knows how to tell a falsehood, she said :

“ Why yes, certainly.”

“ Well, it matters little,” sighed Paul. “ One thing is certain, that without you, I should not be in this world.”

In the depths of her loyal soul, Claire was aware of the cause which she was defending against herself. Nadia's fate was in her hands. Paul's heart must be cured. Something more must be done : he and Nadia must marry. But, first of all she must find out a favorable moment in which to tell the news to the invalid ; she must employ all of her feminine tact to give to another the man she had saved, whom she loved with all her soul. Claire was prepared for the sacrifice, and only awaited the hour to act. She would have considered it a task less hard, to pass fifteen nights at Paul's bedside, and if she had listened to her inclinations, she would have disappeared without saying anything, before broaching the fatal subject.

Moreover, it was necessary that the ground should be well prepared. Not once, since her arrival at Panticosa, had her cousin's name been pronounced. No allusion had been made to Mme. Fresnel's existence. And, even at that moment, the weakness, the nervous irritability of the convalescent were still so great that, in the interest of success, she feared to speak of Nadia.

On the twenty-fifth of August, Chérancy left his room. Leaning on Claire's arm and on Marthe's

shoulder, the latter very proud to support her friend's tottering steps, Paul descended the staircase, which he did not remember mounting. The sun shone brightly upon the rocks. The flowers in the garden raised their drooping heads. The three pedestrians seated themselves upon a bench under the shade of some trees. Round about wandered several bathers with sallow complexions. No one ever knows what surprising shades a human face can assume if they have not seen a Spaniard with a diseased liver.

The doctor, who was passing by upon his rounds, saw his patient, and advanced to congratulate him.

"Do you know," said he, "what my prescription is? To leave here as soon as possible. Summer is drawing to a close, the nights are becoming chilly; two-thirds of my patients have left. I will give you three days more, after which I shall drive you away. Come! confess you do not need me any longer."

Paul confessed nothing, and when the doctor had gone, neither the Countess, her daughter nor their companion uttered a word. It was owing to the fact that each of them, in his or her own fashion and in secret, regretted that pleasant intercourse which had to be interrupted and which could never be resumed.

The evening they spent in Paul's room in which a fire burned, to take the chill off the air; the lamp was discreetly shaded; Chérancy was playing draughts with Marthe; the Countess' eyes were fastened upon them, although she held a book in her

hand which she made a pretense of reading. In due season, at a sign from her mother, the child rose and put away the draughts, preparatory to retiring.

"What a pity," sighed Marthe, "that we can not spend many, many evenings like this."

"Two still remain," replied Paul sadly. "That is something."

He took a candle in order to escort Mme. de Chalonne and her daughter to the other end of the long building. A kiss upon the child's brow, a very deep bow to the Countess, and they parted without any further demonstrations. Chérancy returned to his room, counting his steps in the interminable gallery. He was thinking of the resolution he should take, and while his reason said: "Departure!" his heart said: "Separation!"

"Oh, mad thought!" sighed he, "Spare me this evening! It will be time enough to suffer to-morrow!" In the meantime, Claire de Chalonne watched her kneeling daughter at her prayers. On seeing that child of ten strike her breast, she examined herself. "Still two evenings! No, not two, one is too many. To-morrow at this hour, the work shall have been accomplished."

The following day the doctor was of the opinion that the convalescent should try his strength and spend three hours in the afternoon in the open air. Paul and his two companions took the only road which connected that desert, where Fate had brought together the three beings about to separate forever,

with the rest of the inhabited globe. They walked by the side of the small lake, on the shore, the turf of which was already turning yellow, where were grazing large sheep which shook at every turn of their heads, their enormous bells with their cracked sounds. To their left the vertical granite wall. To the right, at the other side of the lake, a peak raised into the clouds its crown of snow from which floated like broken plume the froth from a cascade.

Paul, once again the artist, glanced at the scene with an enraptured air, and felt his breast expand to the pure breeze.

“My God ! How beautiful that is !” he exclaimed. “It would have been a pity to bring me here between four boards, instead of allowing me to walk here alive and happy, with my two guardian angels.”

They crossed the marble bridge and Claire shuddered as she thought of the anguish which had tortured her ten days before, as she followed the endless windings of the road. She shuddered again, when, on returning to the baths after a short rest, Chérancy showed her, almost lost in the sky beyond the buildings, the narrow fissure through which runs the path to Cauterets.

“If you knew,” said he, “how ill I was on descending, what courage it required for me not to obey the voices of the abyss which called to me ! All would have been ended long ago. My friends would perchance have read the news in their papers. When I think that had it not been for the letter found in my pocket—”

He paused, reminded of the absent one, of her who had written that letter.

Mme. de Chalonne was on the point of speaking, thinking the opportunity at hand ;—but, seeing Paul hesitate, she resolved to wait.

The falling shadows hastened their return. The same vague sadness oppressed them all, even the child. By a mute accord they avoided parting, feeling as necessary one to the other, as lost in that corner of the mountains as if they had been on an abandoned island of the Ocean. Their supper they ate together, the convalescent partaking heartily of the food. Before long he should require all his strength ! Once again the fire chanted its gay hymn in the brightly lighted chamber. Once again some one thought :

“ If it could only be the same every evening of our lives ? ” But that time it was not little Marthe. Tired out by the mountain air, she fell asleep in her arm-chair, her pretty dark head leaning against the back. Separated by that angel,—could it be called separated,—Claire and Paul kept their eyes fixed on her sweet face, for both, at that hour, felt that it was best.

“ Angel that I bore,” prayed the Countess,” obtain strength from God for me, your mother ! You may sleep this evening, dearest ! But, in the future you must remain awake. We shall be alone : I shall require all your affection. Alas ! what shall I do when another gains it ? I shall be alone, alone forever, alone with the thought that I have done my duty. For I shall do it ; the moment has come ! ”

"She closed her eyes an instant, summoned all her courage, and speaking almost in a whisper, in order not to awaken her daughter, she said to Paul:

"You feel well, do you not? You are strong? You can listen to a a serious conversation?"

"Yes," he replied, starting. "I am well. My mind, if not my body, has regained its energy. It is time to leave here; I know it. The air of Panticosa is not beneficial to me. Ah! no. It is perfidious and dangerous in its serene purity. I know it, you see, without my doctor telling me and without you reminding me of it."

Mme. de Chalonne seemed not to see the heart-broken smile of Chérancy, for she kept her eyes cast down upon her folded hands. She continued:

"It is something else I have to say to you. You are about to hear grave news, and if I had not wished you to hear it from my lips alone, I should not have remained here this evening. M. de Chérancy, Nadia is a widow."

"Great God!" he exclaimed, half-rising from the chair into which he had fallen. "A widow! Since when?"

"More than six months. It has taken all that time for the unfortunate man's death to reach France. My cousin has known it only a week. Now do you understand why she did not come? Were you not surprised to see a friend, until then unknown, in that place—which was not hers?"

"I was too happy and too weak to think," muttered Paul, very low.

Meeting a glance full of reproach, he hastened to add:

"I was so ill, so discouraged, so depressed! I thought of nothing but that you would save me, and that I was happy to be saved by you. A widow!" he repeated. "For six months!"

"Yes, a widow; that is to say free. It is for that reason that she did not come. 'Were I to enter in my mourning,' she wrote to me, 'who knows what he would think; that I had come to care for him or to force him into a marriage.' That fear formerly, would not have stopped her, but now!—I have allowed you to read one of her letters. You could see what was passing in that mind so proud, so bitterly humiliated since she has trembled for your life. At this moment she knows your body to be cured, but she does not know, poor Nadia, if your heart is cured like the rest."

Paul was silent. On his face could be read the story abruptly recalled of a cruel time of his life, perhaps too of the memory of hours not so far away and more sweet.

"Listen," said Claire, mistaking the cause of the trouble she saw, "do you think that these hands which have cured your body, would be capable of burying your honor, forever? It runs no risk, believe me, on the road which duty traces for you, and which is also that of happiness."

Paul had leaned his elbows on the table and buried his face in his hands.

"I believe you," he sighed, "when you tell me

that my honor is safe. My confidence in you is such that your word does more to convince me than all the proofs . . .”

He paused a moment, made an effort, and continued with sad bitterness:

“All the proofs which human power could give me. But if you knew . . . if you knew! If I confessed to you at this moment that I am struggling to chase away the shameful, scornful, ignoble regret of not having been completely killed, since—.”

“M. de Chérancy,” severely interrupted the young lady, “only one word remains to be added. My rôle is ended, and I shall leave you to-morrow. I shall take away, as recompense, shall I not, the satisfaction of having devoted myself to an honorable man.”

“Yes!” he exclaimed, his voice, his position, his expression suddenly changing. “Oh! yes! Go in peace! You can at least think that. If you think of me, remember that the man saved by your incredible pity was not unworthy of it. May God bless you to the last day of your life!”

“May He bless us!” corrected Mme. de Chalonne gravely. “We must both be happy. We shall be, I am sure. You shall see.”

Then for a long time they gazed on one another. According to appearances, the happiness of which their lips spoke was not in their souls. Notwithstanding their efforts to smile, they both wept.

Little Marthe had not stirred. But, with eyes wide open, she gazed at them in surprise.

XVII.

On the morning of the following day, Paul, coming from the telegraph office, met the Countess and her daughter in the little garden with the drooping flowers.

"I have just," said he, "telegraphed my intended arrival to Paris."

Claire offered him her hand. That was her reply.

"Before that," continued Paul, "I saw my doctor. The *exeat* is signed. I leave to-morrow morning. But not by the Marcadau this time, rest assured. I am going by the ladies' road; Sallent, Gabas and the Eaux-Chaudes. At Pau, I shall, acting on the doctor's advice, rest a day."

"That is prudent," said Claire.

"Of course, it goes without saying, that we shall travel together, does it not? The same carriage will do for us, and I shall once more have the pleasure of seeing my young friend, Marthe, caracole on her mule, on crossing the mountains."

At any other time, that prospect would have caused the young horsewoman to leap with joy. But it was easy to see that the thought of departing pained her. Seated on a bench, she caressed in silence a superb dog of which she had become very fond and which accompanied her in all her walks.

Mme. de Chalonne after a moment's reflection, replied: "I think I will let you go alone. To-morrow is a little too soon for me, and I think—"

"But last night you said you would leave to-day?"

"I did not then think, it is true," said the Countess, "that my daughter could continue her Cauterets treatment here. The waters of Panticosa work wonders, and it would be madness to interrupt the 'cure' a second time. Look at the little one! What an air of health she has! Since our arrival here, she has an enormous appetite."

Marthe, under the pretext of caressing her friend, the dog, put her lips to his large curly head, and murmured, very low: "My poor *Bramatuero*! I do not eat anything! If you knew! I left the greater part of my chocolate, just now. But it is not necessary to tell it."

Bramatuero was capable of doing his part in that quartette, where each one seemed to have sworn to silence. Paul, very much discomfited to find that he was to travel alone, maintained silence, too. Until noon, time was spent in making a tour of the shops where they sold the products of local industry. Gifts were exchanged between the three companions. The Countess would only accept a chaplet of Pyrenees stone, for several *pesetas*. The child, on the other hand, was forced to accept a fine mantilla, for ten louis.

"What shall you do with it?" asked her mother. "It is much too pretty for you!"

"Ah! mamma, I will lend it to you."

No sooner said than done. The Countess wore the rich lace all day; it made of her a *señora*

dangerous to gaze upon, even for those sick people better cured than Paul. The latter was presented with a cane by the mother, and, by the daughter, with one of those wooden animals carved at Lucerne. Then they went to luncheon, for the bell had rung, but, to tell the truth, no one ate anything.

Towards one o'clock they set out for a walk. If you are not an active member of the Alpine Club, Panticosa will not offer you any choice of promenades; there is only one. They therefore walked beside the lake whose waters, on that day, were almost blue.

About two hundred paces from the baths, the pedestrians were joined by an old woman who was returning to the valley, driving before her a microscopic donkey. The animal, free from all burden, rambled tranquilly along, not finding even a thistle to divert him from his philosophical reflections. Undoubtedly he was wondering by what irony of fate it was necessary for him daily to climb the hillside, bowed beneath his burden, while he carried nothing on descending. That time he had counted without his host, for the sight of that humble courser had reawakened young Marthe's adventurous instincts. The donkey received a load such as he had never known and set out at a trot, beaten vigorously by the old woman, who scented a wind-fall. *Bramatuero* ran ahead, uttering yelps which filled the narrow valley with echoes.

For the first time in their lives, with the exception of the day on which they had, with such diffi-

culty, concluded the sale of a painting, Countess de Chalonne and Paul de Chérancy found themselves entirely alone.

“What a dear creature that child is!” said he, instinctively choosing the only subject which imposed no constraint upon them. “You do not know how much I love her and how much I shall always love her.”

“I hope so. That will, moreover, in a short while be your duty, since you will become her uncle.”

“Her uncle?” repeated Paul, mechanically.

“Yes, or something near it. Well, I really believe there exists between you two a more than ordinary affection. I noticed that child last night while she was playing with you; her eyes beamed with tenderness. Do you know what I have thought?”

“No,” replied Chérancy, who for the moment was not a man of many words.

“I have thought that in sending me to Panticosa, against all anticipation, God had an object, and that object was to give to that child a faithful protector. Poor little one! She is so alone in life!”

“Alone! with a mother like you?”

“The best of mothers is only a woman; that is to say, something strangely weak. Remain always Marthe’s friend—you, who are so good and so strong. Remain her devoted friend, even when the unhappy days have passed, when happiness—”

“Happiness!” exclaimed Paul, standing still.

"Of what can you be thinking, to fancy that it will ever exist for me?"

"My God!" moaned Claire, wringing her hands. "Have I deserved to hear such words? That is, then, the future awaiting you, my poor Nadia. Without him, lost; with him, unhappy for ever, perhaps!"

"Unhappy? Oh, no! Let the present enlighten you as to the future. Ten days ago, notwithstanding your advice, your prayers, I fled from Paris. You addressed to me three words last night: '*Nadia is free.*' And I set out. I trample under foot all the rest; I hasten to pay the sacred debt, to give my name, my entire life. If you are not satisfied, Madame, you are difficult to please."

"Ah! but you are far from pardoning!"

"You mean from forgetting, for I pardoned from the very first. To *pardon* is nothing. It is to bury the dead after night has fallen on the field of battle. To resuscitate them, to heal their wounds, to fasten limbs to their mutilated bodies; that is to *forget*. Christ *pardoned* Calvary; he did not *forget* it. The cross, which rises everywhere to remind the human race of it, is the proof."

"Is it possible that one single moment has left in your heart such a flood of bitterness?"

"One moment! But what a moment! She who forgot me during that moment can not reproach me for having during five years given the shadow of a thought to another. And, during those five years, do you think that I have not often met agreeable

vice, or virtue still more attractive. But neither my years nor my ears belonged to me. *For her*, on the other hand, a few weeks of assiduity, a few manoeuvres, sufficed. I was deposed, driven out, as of no consequence, as an unworthy servitor!"

"The error of a moment!"

"But during that moment, another took my place. He was proclaimed master; I, the dethroned sovereign, was put to flight!"

"Come," said Claire, "many sovereigns, to-day, would be glad to know so short an exile. What woman had ever a more sincere, more rapid revulsion of feeling? If you knew how she suffers, how she weeps, how she curses that fatal moment, with what trembling fervor she adores you! Ah! if I were a man, I should have liked to have tried thus her I loved. What can you fear, henceforth?"

"From her, nothing. I think, I am sure of it. But for myself? . . . To-morrow at this hour, I shall have crossed the mountains which have separated me for ten days from the rest of the world, and in a few months, no doubt, I shall have sealed my destiny. Shall I have succeeded as well in closing the door upon certain memories, too sweet? . . . Shall I have forgotten the noble woman without whom I should have died?"

"Oh, as for that," replied Mme. de Chalonne, attempting to smile, "you know that I nursed you for another. It is Nadia alone who should be thanked. *She* cured you through my hand."

"Pity her, if as you say, Fate chose a hand which replaced hers too well."

"She, at least, has gained in this way: that she has not been condemned by you as the only one who forgets," said Claire.

And, as her companion, without replying, lowered his head:

"Marthe!" cried she to her daughter, "you are overheating yourself! Leave your donkey and join us."

The child obeyed. The donkey trotted along the rocky road which led to the village. The old woman put her money in her pocket, and hoping for another meeting: "*Por la manana!*" (Until to-morrow!) followed her beast. "To-morrow! . . ." repeated Paul, wearily.

A nod of his head completed the sentence, and the pedestrians, turning, resumed the road to the hotel almost in silence. Chérancy sought his rooms to prepare his luggage. Marthe went in search of her nurse. The Countess entered the small chapel with the white walls, the bright pictures; and the chaplet given her by Paul that very morning, was clasped between her fingers for some time.

That evening Claire sent word that she was tired, that she would dine in her own apartment, and that she bade the traveler farewell. The latter, by the same means, sent his adieux to mother and daughter. He ate little and slept uneasily. Early the next morning the carriage awaited him. He superintended the loading of his luggage, at the same time casting

a sly glance towards a certain window, whose shutters seemed to be closed.

The traveler shook hands with excellent Señor Candau, thanking him for having so opportunely overhauled his pockets on a certain evening. The coachman only awaited the order to whip up his horses. There was no longer any excuse for delay, yet Paul did not start, still hoping for a last word, a last sign from Claire.

"Is it possible that she has determined not to appear?" thought he. "How is it that she does not divine how much I suffer, what a night I passed? To punish me with such severity for the few words I could not restrain! what does she fear? all is ended now. I know her; I know that she is above reproach and without weakness. But what would she have lost by showing me a little of that tender pity which comprises the weakness of others?"

It was useless to wait any longer. Already the traveler had his hand upon the door when he perceived, several paces off, the companion of his promenade of the preceding day. God save you from experiencing certain dark moments when the mute caress, the glance of a dog becomes a precious consolation! Paul underwent one of those moments of bitterness.

"Come here, *Bramatuero!*" he called.

With two bounds the animal was beside him. Then taking the large head between his hands the traveler put his lips to the rough hair.

"You," said he under his breath, "will see her

soon!" Such were, for lack of others, his adieux at Panticosa. A second later, he was on the way, and the white houses, the little garden, the lake with its gray water, disappeared successively.

In the meanwhile, she, whom he almost cursed for her coldness, was weeping bitter tears, and gazing after the carriage which was disappearing. Claire had no longer need to struggle; she was no longer obliged to appear cold, inexorable and hard. She stood erect, behind her blinds, in the large room where, since the night before, the lamp was still burning. She was very pretty at that moment, pretty with a kind of beauty which no one attributed to her. Her ebony tresses fell upon her superb arms; one of her hands was pressed to her throbbing white bosom; her entire form, in its light gown which she had hastily donned, trembled. She resembled a fine animated statue; no longer that of Duty, unless it was Duty vanquished by Love, and hiding her defeat.

An hour later, Mme. de Chalonne, still pale, but to all appearances as calm as ever, crossed the garden towards the office of the administrator of the baths. When she issued from it, *Bramatuero* was with her.

"It is a fancy of my daughter's," she had said, as if to excuse that acquisition.

The child was not there to protest that all she did was attributed to caprice.

XVIII.

Paul and Nadia met again forty-eight hours after the incidents just narrated.

"My God! but you are still pale and thin!" were Madame Fresnel's first words.

"And you, poor darling!" replied Paul, kissing the hands extended to him.

Indeed, Nadia was changed the most. The mourning which she wore, mourning for a near relative rather than for a husband, augmented her pallor. Upon her hands, still white but less plump, stood out a network of blue veins—the first unmistakable indication of the appearance of the autumn of life in woman. Threads of silver, though rare, had come; but they were lost in the abundant wealth of gold. The touching charm of the face was still there. Beauty had become resignation, calmness, melancholy. It was evident that the woman had suffered; that nothing would ever remove from her smile that indefinable blight which one cold morning leaves upon the summer flowers. The October rose is still the rose, but where is the perfume of May?

"Nadia, here I am!" said Paul, with grave gentleness. "Here I am, forever! Of the past only one thing remains: the affection which unites us, and the promises which bind us."

"Ah," she exclaimed, "you are better than I!"

She sobbed, her head resting upon her friend's

breast. But that time they were very sweet tears. Paul, kissing her brow, replied:

"I am not better than you. I swear to you I never thought that for a single moment. But if that thought had occurred to me, it would be very far from me now."

"Why?" she asked, struck by the conviction with which Chérancy spoke.

"Because, I know myself better. But," he continued, changing the subject and looking about him, "I see nothing here that was once familiar to me. Has fire worked havoc with your apartment? This salon is entirely changed." "Yes," she said, with a melancholy smile. "You can look into every nook. All that you can see has never been displayed to the eye of any other man."

Paul, in his turn, felt moved almost to tenderness. "Ah!" he cried, "it is you who are better than I!"

"All those changes were not made for you, but for me. You have traveled, you have seen other scenes; but I, I spend my days here without any diversion, and I took a dislike to the smallest article in this room—in this one only. For thank God! the other rooms can remind me of only one thing: the tears I shed there alone!"

"Come!" said Paul, "that is all at an end. For the last time in our lives we have conjured up those memories. On my honor, I shall never mention them to you again. From to-day a new future begins."

They dined together, as they had so often done.

Paul had the dishes he liked. In every glance, every gesture of his friend he divined that she would have liked to serve him upon her knees.

Dinner hour was spent in a recital of his illness.

"What a woman that Claire is!" said Nadia. "We owe all to her. You know all that she has done for you; but could you read the letters she wrote to me! Later on I will tell you many things. What surprises me is that she did not give you the least message from me."

Paul made no reply. He maintained silence, and the remainder of the evening the Countess' name was not mentioned. He did not remain late, for the traveler, still convalescent, had need of rest. He took leave with a chaste kiss upon the brow of her whom he henceforth should look upon as his betrothed. Neither of them confessed to him or herself, on the days which followed, the thought which, during the entire night, had banished sleep from their couches.

XIX

September had scarcely begun : Paris was deserted. If there was a spot which Paul and Nadia would have had occasion to fly from, it was certainly Paris. Both required pure air and scenes of a tranquilizing nature. For both of them, after having met again, experienced without acknowledging it the same

sentiment : the dread of solitude, or rather of a tête-à-tête.

Alas ! for them began the harsh apprenticeship of wounds to hide, of smiles to be feigned, of suspicious thoughts to be interrupted, the constant precaution of avoiding certain names, certain words which brought the silence of death after them. They had comprehended that after their first interview, and courageously they undertook their task. In each of those noble hearts, one thought governed the other :

“ At any price, happiness. As for me ? What does it matter ? ” Then too, between them, what a storm of tenderness, of gentleness, of smiles. And when they separated, what sadness ! And still more cruel, what lassitude ! To leave Paris ! How would they dare ? There, at least, propriety, the necessities of life separated them for many hours. They could, at frequent intervals, unloosen the armor, leave off the stifling mask. But continual intercourse, the constant tête-à-tête in the heart of a valley in the Tyrol, in some village by the mountain side, as formerly ! . . .

The mere thought of facing that deprived them of strength. And yet their lungs required other air than the vitiated atmosphere of the warm streets. Daily, they took long walks in the picturesque suburbs of Paris. But, on the fresh slopes of the river, beneath the majestic beeches of Saint-Germain, on the green hill-sides of Marly, one thought followed them. Nadia did not cease to see her incompre-

hensible weakness. Paul, more to be pitied yet, was haunted by the vision of two women: one, whom it was necessary to pardon of a semi-treason, the other whose touching kindness and radiant charms he was obliged to forget. Of the two tasks, he felt that the first was not the more difficult. When, occasionally, belated in their promenade, the two companions seated themselves in some rustic inn to dine, Chérancy saw before his eyes the little table at Panticosa, that first meal of the convalescent taken opposite Claire, whose black eyes, sparkling with pleasure, followed every morsel carried to the lips of her invalid. Instinctively, he sought the constrained gaiety of little Marthe, careful not to weary her friend.

For he could not picture the mother without the daughter, and in the improbable dreams in which he often indulged, they were never separated, one from the other. One day, at Montmorency, the sight of a pretty child riding on a donkey made him turn pale. He looked about for the old Spaniard, and *Bramatuero*, and—above all—for a dark lady, with an erect form, a smile now sweet, now sad. All, alas! were far away.

Fate, ever pitiless, did not spare poor Nadia the blows from its sling. On crossing a field in the Louveciennes quarter, they saw a lot of colts eating the grass in the midst of a vast enclosure. Mme. Fresnel had always been fond of horses. She inquired the name of the owner of the stud.

"Those are," replied a man working near by, "Viscount de Saint Rieul's race-horses."

That name, so unexpected, produced upon Nadia the effect which can be imagined. Anything rather to have heard that name! But she remembered, too, that she had resolved to tell Chérancy how Roqueservièrre had been put to flight. With her constant desire to be frank, she related the entire story of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, and of Claire's intervention.

To her great surprise, Paul was not astonished. But for the first time he showed severity towards Mme. de Chalonne. "I knew of the adventure," said he, "and not considering that it was very much to any one's credit, I kept it in my archives. The secrets which touch a woman's honor should be sacred to all the world; to another woman above all!"

"That is," thought the poor penitent, "what Claire has gained by her devotion, and what I have gained by my frankness. Ah! decidedly, silence is better for all of us."

Some time after, while reading a journal aloud—a thing which formerly he did not do—Paul chanced upon the description of a hunting accident at Poitou, on the estates of that same viscount de Saint-Rieul. A guest of the wealthy land-owner, the Marquis de Roqueservièrre, had been shot in the side by the viscount. Then followed, said the journal, great anxiety among the huntsmen, despair on the part of the author of the accident. Fortunately the shot had struck a pocket in which were some thickly-

folded papers. The wound, not a complicated one, presented no serious dangers.

“Awkward!” grumbled Paul, shrugging his shoulders. Nadia turned as pale as death, and burst into tears. “That is something to weep about,” said Chérancy, with an effort maintaining his self-control. “Every year we hear of poachers killing the guards. This time it was the poacher who received the shot.”

“Ah!” replied Nadia, as she wiped her eyes, “It was not the accident at which I was weeping, but your words.”

She wrote to her cousin that same evening:

“You have read that horrible hunting accident! It disturbed me to such a degree that I have come to pour out my heart to you, silent friend. I need to cry to some one that I curse that derangement of the human brain called love. I curse our sex, which, since the first woman, has scattered misfortune around her.

“A man deceives his friend in a cowardly manner. The deceived calmly assassinates. A third person reads the shocking story in my presence, and what exclamation do you think escapes him? ‘Awkward.’ That is all that his mind suggests to him, because the thirst for vengeance possesses him as well!

“And such is the heart, ulcerated, bruised, bleeding, upon which, for life, I am to lean my head!

“I swear to you, that were I to follow my inclinations I should already be far from this odious world. My poor Claire! if you knew how unhappy I am!

If you knew how I weep when I am alone ! How I weep at the very moment I am writing to you ? Ah, I feel it : all is ended ! All happiness here below is dead for me ; not that he does not still love me, that being, noble and generous in spite of everything. That rancor is a proof that love still exists. But myself ! . . . Something is broken in my miserable body : I no longer respect myself ; I no longer have confidence in myself ; I no longer vibrate at a breath. My God ! where is my former enthusiasm ? My momentary aberration has dispelled the dream ; life appears to me in its heart-breaking reality. The charm is broken !

“ But you shall be the only one to know of my suffering. I belong to Paul, and I shall pay my debt, since he claims it. He shall have, I swear, the most devoted, the most faithful of wives ! Ah ! faithful ! that will not be difficult now. When the wings of a bird hang mutilated, one need not fear to leave the cage open ! ”

The leaves were beginning to turn yellow ; the days were less fine ; the walks grew more rare and shorter. With the same heroism Paul and Nadia continued the dolorous task of deceiving one another. If the religion of human sacrifice, like the other, has saints and martyrs, the two beings whose torture I have to relate, would merit shrines.

“ Nothing by halves ! ” Such was their motto, a device fatal or glorious.

For some time Mme. de Chalonne had been at La Prée, and her melancholy, from day to day more

evident, struck everyone. Never, since the earliest days of her widowhood, had she appeared so down-cast. At the beginning of January she received a letter which was not calculated to sooth her. Chérancy wrote thus :

“ To-morrow, the first year of your cousin’s widowhood expires. I wish to wait until that day to tell her and to hear from her the words which will unite us forever. To-morrow I shall no longer belong to myself, but to-day I still do. I have, for twenty-four hours, the right to think, to remember, to speak. . . . Of what use is that ? you will say. None ! But those on the point of death feel the need of leaving the trace behind them of their last thoughts. With me it takes the form of a desire : To be certain that I leave you satisfied with me. I should, perhaps, thank you again for having climbed the mountains to save my life. Excuse me, Madame, I do not thank you. You cured me, but you made me pay dearly for that cure.

“ You let me spend alone that gloomy evening preceding my departure. You let me leave Panticosa without raising your hand to my lips a last time. Panticosa ! Can that name carry so much sweetness to the ear, so much bitterness to the heart ?

“ Like the woman in the poem which you made me repeat twice on a certain day, you go upon your way without hearing that which it is not necessary to hear, without seeing that which you need not see. Having come to nurse a sick man in another’s place, the cure accomplished, you disappeared. So much the worse for the sick man if he carried away with him the germ of another illness more incurable.

“ Do you remember our breakfast on the grass on the day of your fête and Marthe’s roses—the surprise—concealed in the paper which so illy hid them ? They were not meant to be seen, and you did not see them. You did not ask : ‘ For whom are those flowers ? ’ And when they were disclosed how excellently your astonishment was simulated.

“ At Panticosa, too, flowers were hidden—not much better—very near your hand ; poor flowers, blooming in sadness ! My last act of a free man, of a man who can still speak to-day, is to say to you : ‘ The flowers are for you ! Keep them, Madame, they are the last that will bloom in my life.’

“Now, adieu ! I am going to seal my fate. I am going to give myself away. Miserable gift. But the surrender will be still worse. And then you will be content ; you, the incarnation of loyalty. At that price, I shall always have your esteem, and I shall see from afar your smile so pure, so severe at times, and yet the sweetest that I have seen on the lips of woman.

“Adieu ! Kiss Marthe for me and tell her that I adore her. Allow to float between us two the eternal echo of that supreme word.
CHÉRANCY.”

“Ah, the unfortunates !” exclaimed Claire, after having read that letter.

She remained alone several hours, locked in her room, permitting her grief to have free scope. From day to day she tasted of the mournful joy of suffering freely. She became intoxicated with that bitter medicine, as other women infuse into their veins the poison which lulls to sleep. She had made a bargain with her conscience which comforted her. Had she not the right to love Paul since he had accused her all her life of coldness and of cruelty ? Every transport of her heart was atoned for by a tear. Who could do otherwise than weep ?

They say that certain thoughts pervade the air in the manner of a subtle perfume. Claire did not mention to her daughter the letter she had received, still less what she had experienced on reading it. Why, on that evening, when alone with her mother, who always assisted her to disrobe, did the child ask a thousand questions about Chérancy ? Oh, mothers, how those childish questions at times cause you to lower your heads ! How many there are among you who evade them harshly. Between Mme.de Chalonne and her daughter such a feeling did not exist, and

Marthe could chat at her ease. For an hour Claire was happy, happy between the two beings, the dearest to her in the world; one of whom she held by the hand, the other whose name softly caressed her ear. She was happy without remorse, for she thought a love governed all others in her heart, the love of her daughter.

Finally Marthe grew weary. Her pretty, brown head sank upon its snowy pillow. For several moments the mother waited, finding, for once, that sleep came too quickly. Suddenly the child opened her eyes:

"Mamma," said she, "I wanted to ask you one thing. What would you say if I tried to write a letter to M. Paul, to-morrow?" Would you correct my errors?"

"You may try," replied Mme. de Chalonne, kissing her daughter's brow, "now go to sleep, my angel."

In the course of a few days, Paul received a four page letter from his young friend. Marthe wrote a line about her mother, four about herself, the rest about *Bramatuero*. Claire had considered it best to render the child no assistance, although a trace of her hand-writing could be seen in some doubtful terminations of participles, precious corrections which Chérancy studied with zeal.

"Well," concluded Marthe, "*Bramatuero* has replaced you. Twenty times a day I ask him: where is M. Paul? Then he barks and wags his tail.

Mamma then caresses him and says she has never seen a dog with such a memory."

God knows the innocent missive contained no secrets, and yet Paul did not show it to Nadia when he visited her a few hours after having received it.

He decided that during that visit the formal words should be spoken and final arrangements made. But, on entering Nadia's salon, he perceived that she was very much depressed.

"What ails you, dearest?" he asked.

Without replying, she held towards him a newspaper in which he read once more a name which she seemed fated never to forget; Roqueservière was dead.

The wound, due to the Viscount's imprudence, proved more serious than they at first thought it would. One lung had been injured, and the doctor had advised him to spend the approaching winter at Cannes. But instead of recovering, the wounded man grew weaker and weaker. A cough began, and handsome Edmond died, carrying with him, at least so the reporter affirmed, the unanimous regrets of all those who had known him."

Paul frowned and, gazing into space, forgetting that he was not alone, he murmured:

"Not so very awkward, Saint Rieul."

"Oh, my God! he does not even forgive the dead!" moaned Nadia.

Chérancy could not restrain a shudder at that reproach. "Forget that unworthy speech," said he, suddenly recalled to himself. "Listen to me, Nadia. To-day your year of widowhood ends. This is the

time I awaited to ask you to be my wife. I entered here, I vow, with those words on my lips. Alas! poor darling! We all become more or less savages when there is the question of the woman who belongs to us, who is to be ours. Ah! see here, I can not help thinking that this journal has brought us a good omen. Perhaps I showed myself barbarous in my joy. But I have suffered so much at the thought that another man lived who—

“For pity’s sake,” interrupted Nadia; “do not say any more. And since the death of a man was required to make you happy, you may be so. As for me, until the last hour of my life as of yours, I will give you all that is best in me, my dear Paul.”

He opened his arms without replying, and the newly betrothed bride felt a chill at her heart beneath the kiss she received.

“What is there surprising in that?” thought she. “We have exchanged our vows in the presence of a coffin. Ah! dreams of other days, where are ye!”

XX.

To two persons only—to her old friend, Sireuil, and to the Countess—did Nadia impart her plans for her second marriage.

Sireuil came the same day to the future Mme. de Chérancy’s and congratulated her warmly.

“That is right,” he cried. “No news could have

caused me more joy. Fate owed you compensation; you are receiving it complete, which is not customary. You will return to your world, which found the name of Fresnel somewhat short, even before that name became sullied. Chérancy has intellect, fortune, talent. And to crown all, he loves you; an old love, I suspect; a faithful love, I'll wager."

"Ah, my poor Sireuil, repeat that. I have need to be sure."

"Between us, dear friend, if you are not sure of it it is not for want of putting the candidate to the test; a double test, too,—that of fire and that of water."

"What do you mean?"

"My God! . . . We are talking as old friends, are we not? The water was Roqueservière. I do not insist; I know nothing. But I have every reason to suppose that our brave Chérancy has received, once in his life, a fine pailful of cold water."

"Ah, be silent," said Nadia. "What memories!"

"Let us leave out the water if the subject is distasteful to you. But, with regard to the fire, indeed, if I must confess it, I really thought at Cauterets that your cousin and your friend were running straight into a fine fire."

"Truly!"

"Why, my dear, you seem surprised. I declare to you, in Chérancy's place, I should have completely lost my head. Upon my word, one would think you had never seen the Countess."

"Ah, yes," replied Nadia, slowly. "I have watched

her more than you think. And I have rarely seen so handsome a woman."

"Well, do you think, for instance, that M. Paul is blind? Do you think he lacks seductive power? Combine with their mutual personal attractions the romantic meeting. On the one side, sadness, loneliness, the pail of cold water still trickling over his shoulders. On the other, pity, esteem, admiration; for Chérancy has been what one would call a man, you know! That was already enough. But the rest. . . But Panticosa! . . . That adorable woman, who crossed streams, and precipices, who watched the sick man day and night in a desert, who nursed him, who saved him; while with your proud way—which I divine, and which I understand—you waited for some one to come to remove your widow's veil! . . . If that is not a proof, what do you want?"

"It is true," replied Nadia, dreamily.

She had still more food for thought on reading the letter which she received from La Prée the next day. It was not that she could any longer doubt the sincerity of the satisfaction manifested by her cousin. Only, Claire's response ended with these words:

"I am afraid that it will be impossible for me to assist at your marriage. The winter promises to be very severe. I fear our Bordeaux climate is not mild enough for Marthe, whose health still demands great care. Moreover, you say yourself that you desire at your wedding less joy than prayers. Mine shall not be wanting, and will be of more value to you than the sight of a sad face. Will not mine be sad on that occasion, which will remind me of what I have suffered? My dearest

may you be happy! After my child's happiness, I desire yours the most in the world."

Once more—the last time in her life—Nadia displayed her disposition—that of an angry, imperative and jealous woman. She took her pen and wrote, without reflecting, the following lines:

"Claire, if you love that man, say so! You know what a secret burden I am bearing to the altar. The weight is already sufficiently heavy. But, if it is necessary to struggle with the future against others, and not only against the past but against myself, I shall give up the game. A word uttered by Sireuil and your refusal make me suspicious. I conjure you to reply. Do you love him? Does he love you? Is it possible, great God! that, without gaining my own happiness, I am on the verge of rendering unhappy the two beings for whom I would give my life?"

The Countess wrote:

"You are mad. That is my reply. To tell you the truth, I am delighted to see you jealous again. I am easy now: the Nadia of the good old time is not dead. Since you absolutely desire it, I will take the place of your mother, or, rather of your sister, dearest—the most tender, the most faithful, the most devoted of sisters."

In the "good old times" Nadia would not have been so easily reassured as she was by those lines, which seemed to make light of her emotion. Fortunately, she could not see the face of her who wrote in so happy a strain, nor hear her stifled sobs. Besides the actual presence sufficed; the imagination had no need to evoke other troubles! What bitterness! at the mere thought that she could lose Paul, a hundred times, in days gone by, her heart would have stood still; and now security obtained, all danger vanished, that frozen heart refused to beat!

The day of the marriage was fixed. Two weeks before the date indicated, the Countess left hotel Vouillemont, accompanied by her child, whose health seemed to be of the best. An hour later, mother and daughter arrived at Nadia's, where they found Paul.

Firm and resolute, like a soldier about to risk his life, the latter nevertheless trembled beneath Claire's first glance. While Marthe almost suffocated her friend, and full of pleasant memories, began to prattle of Panticosa, of Cauterets, as if they had met for nothing else.

It seemed as if the two cousins had pledged their word not to listen to that conversation. They talked very loudly, God knows with what object, of the toilettes they were to wear on *the* day. The ceremony was to be solemnized in the chapel of a convent on *Rue de Sevres*.

"What an idea!" said Claire.

Nadia, lowering her voice, replied :

"For six months past, I have spent a great deal of time there. Those walls know all the secrets of my soul. At that altar I promised my sacrifice should take place ; that I should there be united to Paul or betrothed to God. I must keep my promise."

At the end of an hour, Mme. de Chalonne went out on pressing business. Chérencey did not remain much longer.

"I will leave you Marthe," said the Countess to her cousin, "I will return for her at six o'clock."

"You will return, on the contrary, to dine with

me, Sireuil and your future cousin. I have invited them in your honor. Until then, this big person and I, will chat."

Marthe smiled, very much flattered, and, her mother gone, she seated herself near her aunt with the serious air of a woman of thirty.

"I suppose," said Nadia, "that you were greatly surprised on learning why you came here."

"Why, Aunt Nadia... a little," replied the child truthfully.

"Are you not glad to have an uncle who already loves you very much? For I saw you chatting together just now like old friends."

"Oh! Aunt—certainly—I shall be glad."

"You are not speaking frankly, Marthe, you, who are usually so candid! Have you for some reason a dislike to M. de Chérancy?"

The little girl's eyes sparkled, her cheeks grew rosy.

"I! dislike him!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands." Since Papa's death, he is the man I love the most in the world."

On seeing that impetuosity and that enthusiasm, Nadia thought she had discovered in her niece one of those childish passions of which she, too, had been guilty at the same age.

"Come! sit upon my knee," said she, "and confide in me. Since when has your love for M. de Chérancy been so great?"

"Since I saw him so ill, and above all since—"

"Come ! speak ! I was once a little girl like you. You can tell me all."

"Since I saw him cry one night at Panticosa."

"Really ! And why did he cry ?

"Because Uncle Fresnel was dead."

"Ah !" said Nadia, very attentive. "Tell me about that."

"One evening, after dinner, I was so tired from having run about the mountains that I fell asleep in an arm-chair. Suddenly I awoke, and I heard mamma say : 'Nadia is a widow.'"

"And then ?"

"Then I did not stir, I was too much surprised. Nor did M. de Chérancy stir. He seemed as much surprised as I was."

"What did he say ?"

"He said : 'Very well, I shall go away.' But he bent his head and two large tears rolled down his cheeks."

Nadia closed her eyes, started and remained silent a few moments. Then, in a voice which was very much changed, she asked

"And your mother ?"

"Mamma did not cry. But she wanted to. She said nothing, and restrained her tears with all her might."

"You did not then ask what caused them both so much pain ?

"Oh, no ! Aunt Nadia. It was very easy to understand. They were sorry because Uncle Fresnel was dead."

Nadia gasped. The shock was great.

Instead of an hour's chat with an amusing child, she made a discovery which would change her entire life. However, she felt some scruples as to continuing that dangerous examination. What had the child discovered? What grave secret had she surprised? Was it not her duty to allow to rest forever in that pure mind certain souvenirs calculated perhaps to trouble filial love? But, no! she must know all, and, too, Nadia knew Marthe's mother. Her actions, her words, her very thoughts, could all be exposed to the light of day.

"Did they weep long?" asked Mme. Fresnel, clasping her niece in her arms with strange ardor. "Tell me all."

"I have told you all, - Aunt Nadia. Seeing that my eyes were open, mamma touched my shoulder to thoroughly arouse me, and took me away to say my prayers and to put me to bed.

"And the next day?"

"The next day we took a walk together, and when we returned, M. de Chérancy bade me adieu. That evening I dined all alone with mamma. As for him, the following day, early, he left."

"Without seeing your mother or you again?"

"It was too early. But I must tell you one thing which mamma does not know. I was not asleep, for I was very sad. M. de Chérancy is so good! He seemed to have so much trouble! Well, on hearing the horses' hoofs, I rose softly and opened the shutters a little bit. My nurse was not awake. I

could then see him once more. He entered the carriage, then he alighted again in order to embrace *Bramatuero*." . . .

"Who is *Bramatuero*?"

"A large dog that walked with us, and that loves me very much; he is at La Prée. Mamma bought him the day of the departure of—"

"Did you ask her to buy him?"

"No. It was her idea."

"Ah! my poor Claire," thought Nadia. "You did as your daughter. You rose softly, and you saw the kiss given to the dog!"

The niece was still in her aunt's arms, but they no longer spoke; the story was ended. In the tiny salon, faintly lighted by the dying day and by the fire, a deep silence reigned. No one could have read what was passing in Nadia's mind, for she had her face hidden in the little one's dark curls. But the child could hear her aunt's heart throb with strange violence.

Suddenly Marthe felt herself almost suffocated in a desperate embrace. Upon her forehead was pressed a kiss by two burning lips which murmured:

"Dear child, dear angel of truth, of purity, of innocence! Could you only remain as you are to-day—as I was once!"

With a sort of fear which paralyzed her, Marthe witnessed a storm of tears and sobs which she would never forget in her life. On the convulsively agitated breast of the poor woman, who from that time forth had no one but God, the child's body was rocked

like a frail barque on the waves agitated by a tempest.

That for which Nadia wept at that moment was something more than a love, it was *love*, or in other words *life*, for "Love is a woman's whole existence."

For long months her tears had flowed silently on her own dead heart, on that heart which marriage was to receive on the morrow, as the coffin covered with roses receives a beloved form, carefully embalmed. She had believed that the remainder of her life would be spent in watching tenderly over the remains of her youth. But, suddenly the words of a child made it clear to her that she must renounce even that slight happiness, must separate herself from the last memory of her past, short-lived joy.

The storm did not last long. Mme. de Chalonne might return at any moment.

Once more Nadia controlled herself. For her henceforth, combats were ended, the hour of her final retreat rung. Soon she spoke.

"Marthe," said she, "when your mother returns, do not tell her what has just occurred."

"Oh, Aunt Nadia, I will obey you in everything. But, for Heaven's sake do not cry any more!"

"Rest assured, my darling. No human being shall see me weep again."

XXI.

Countess de Chalonne returned several minutes before the dinner hour.

"Not dressed?" said she to her cousin, whom she found reclining in an easy chair by the fire-place, with Marthe still upon her knees. "I have changed my dress. Fie, you idle woman! One might think it was you who had been traveling, and I—"

"That you were going to be married. Indeed, you are young, stylish and pretty, my Clairon. How can any one vie with you? I shall not try to, but will keep on my woolen gown. So much the worse for me if my guests take you for the bride."

"My daughter did not weary you?"

"Certainly not. We have become great friends. You will not give me your daughter?"

"Oh! my treasure!" cried Claire, embracing the child who had left her aunt's lap.

"You greedy person!" said Nadia. "You wish to keep all for yourself."

At that moment Paul entered. The glance with which his *fiancée* received him, caused him, on the threshold, inexplicable anxiety. She had upon her face the same expression of dejection, of heart-broken affection, of adieu, which he had seen upon it on the day when she sobbed at his feet on the floor, one year before.

The remembrance of that hour took possession of him, but only from the generous and noble side.

Once again he swore to reanimate, to comfort that bruised heart. He kissed the hand which Nadia offered him and murmured so that she alone could hear him :

“Why are you sad? Do we not belong to one another forever?”

She gazed at him several seconds without speaking.

“Ah!” said she at length. “You have earned the reward which will be yours!”

In his turn, Lucien Sireuil arrived ; almost at once they seated themselves at the table. The lawyer was hungry and in a good humor.

At dessert he rose, and according to an old custom, drank the health of the future husband and wife. Chérancy and the Countess could not help exchanging glances, for that toast reminded them of another ; that other breakfast on the border of the streamlet, limpid and musical then, at that hour mournful and icy, like their souls.

Nadia’s voice, when she responded, had strange vibrations which made everyone start.

“Dear friends, the only ones I possess here below, I love you all tenderly. Never, never forget this little table around which we have assembled and these words which I have often repeated to myself during the past months: *of all the treasures on earth those of the heart are the most difficult to keep.* May those among us, who possess them, watch well over them ! Once lost. . . .”

Her voice began to tremble, and, prudently, she

ceased. She rose: her guests followed her to the salon, and everyone observed that her hand was unsteady as she poured the coffee into the cups. At her suggestion, the gentlemen lighted cigarettes. She took one herself.

"You know I am half Russian," said she, apologetically. "Sometimes"—and her eyes sought those of Paul—"I have been too much a Russian. But experience has cured me. Give me a light, friend, do not chide me. I swear to you this shall be my last cigarette."

Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed, her lips were like cherries. Rarely did she look so beautiful. Everyone wondered at the cause of that feverish excitement and fixed upon her anxious glances. She seemed unable to rest in one spot, and walked nervously about the small salon, inhaling the perfumed smoke of the *latakié*. Before the picture painted by Chérancy, which represented her asleep in the railroad carriage, she made a long pause and appeared to be lost in a thought singularly sweet.

Turning around she said, suddenly:

"My dear Sireuil, I am going to make you a present. I am going to give you the picture of a friend, and the work of a clever man, who will soon have something better to do than to paint. He deserves something higher with such a heart."

"I shall not accept your gift," responded Sireuil. "Never in my life! Do you wish to get me into your husband's bad graces from the very first day?"

"Rest assured. I will undertake to make him

listen to reason. To-morrow the picture shall be at your house. It shall never leave there, shall it? My dear Paul, yourself assure our friend that I have your approbation."

Paul advanced to Mme. Fresnel and kissed her hand. "To-day and forever, what you do will be well done," said he.

"Good!" replied Nadia, without glancing at him. "Those are words of which I shall remind you before long."

In the meantime Marthe's nurse came to take her young mistress away; as the child, distributing her kisses, reached to her aunt, the latter drew her towards her, and seating herself in an easy chair, once more took the child upon her knees.

"Good-night!" said she. "Good-night, my darling! good-night, for this night and for all those of your life! Blessed angel, go to sleep! Sleep is so good! . . . May God reward you for what you have done to-day; may He be praised! Kiss me, dearest, and may your mother give you kisses for many, many years!"

She pressed to her bosom the child, who stifled her sobs, caused by the inexplicable emotion of those words, which seemed to imply a farewell. The silence of death reigned in the room.

"Now, go;" said Nadia. "It is time for little girls to be in bed."

"Zounds!" muttered Lucien Sireuil, when Marthe had disappeared. "He who could see us at this

moment, would not think that we had come from a betrothal dinner."

"Why?" replied Mme. Fresnel. "Can one not become engaged except with shouts of laughter? I should very much like to see you there, Sir Evergay?"

"Oh, as for me, you will never see me there, thank God." I have seen too much of charming persons sobbing in the sacristy in white veils, or in my study in pink bonnets. It almost seems as if it were with conjugal happiness as it is with the teeth: we weep when they come, we weep when they go."

"Be silent, miserable skeptic! Cross-grained replies seem to be a failing of yours! Three years ago, in this same place, you maintained that unless there was a husband or a convent for protection, all women were vagabonds: To-day I have my choice, you will agree with me!"

Since the conclusion of the meal, the Countess had gazed at her cousin in astonishment, wondering if Nadia had not gone mad.

Paul, not less surprised, glanced alternately at the two women. The mistress of the house thought it was time to put an end to that uneasiness.

"Claire," said she, "you spent the night in a coach. I am going to send you home. Our friend, Sireuil, will escort you to your carriage. Will you not, dear support of widows? Come to see me to-morrow morning. I shall have need of your advice. My dear Paul, I shall detain you ten minutes. Good-night, Clairon."

Mme. de Chalonne rose, obeying like an automaton.

"At what time shall I come to-morrow?" she asked.

"I will drop you a line. Au revoir. Kiss me, sister."

When Nadia was at length alone with her betrothed, she advanced towards him, and, looking him in the face, she asked abruptly :

"Paul, are you pleased to marry me?"

"Pleased, grateful and proud," said he, emphasizing each word.

"Do you come to me without any regret, without any memories which trouble you?"

"I have forgotten all I should forget. I remember all that I should remember, and that is saying a great deal, Nadia. But what ails you? You are very odd this evening, very much agitated."

"I think you will be, too, my friend, when I have told you the news: Claire de Chalonne is going to be married again!"

"Oh!" he exclaimed in horror. "It is—"

He paused, restrained by a feeling of valor.

"It is indeed news," he added.

Then he compressed his lips, wondering how long it would be before he could go out and breathe freely alone in the solitude of the deserted boulevard. Nadia resumed, her eyes still fixed on Paul:

"You do not ask me the name; you are not curious. She is going to marry the man she has loved a long time."

“Ah! whom she has loved a long time?” repeated Paul like an echo.

“She loved someone; you knew it?”

“I fancied so several times. But she concealed her love as if it were a crime. Poor Claire! poor Paul! you would both rather have died than have said a word. Ah! but honor is a fine thing! to urge that point is dangerous. By dint of being honest you, she and I deceived one another like thieves at a fair.”

“Nadia!” cried Chérancy. “Why do you try to entrap me? Enough of this! Become my wife and let us live far from stormy emotions!”

“I came very near committing that madness! Dear blinded man, have you not seen that in my heart love is dead?”

As he made a gesture of dolorous surprise, she continued with a smile :

“Ingrate! Yes, love is dead! I know this: it was I who killed it, killed it by a word! There are terrible, irreparable words. And then, love, the most beautiful thing in this world, is also the most fragile. Occasionally in the icy silence of a winter’s night you have heard the crisp sound of a crystal vase broken by a single breath of cold air. I, at a certain hour, heard the sound of our love breaking. The beautiful vase is no longer whole; the charm is broken, and it was all my fault. The past is dead, as dead as Edmond de Roqueservière. Now listen to that name without anger and without blasphemy. Pardon him, Paul.”

“No!” replied he, shaking his head. “If he had not risen between you and me, we should now be perfectly happy.”

“You shall be! Give me your hand: accept the happiness I offer you: marry Claire. You said to me just now: Whatever you do will be well-done.”

“No! Supposing that I love Countess de Chaulonne! . . .”

“Supposing! Poor friend! If you could have seen your face when I told you of her intended marriage.”

“Cruel woman! You will drive me mad! But, if I were unfortunate enough to love your cousin, it would be a double madness. She does not love me!”

“She does not love you! Are you then so blind that you can not see that which Marthe has instinctively divined?”

“Well, it does not matter. You are advising a cowardly piece of selfishness. With it all, you do not speak of your future.”

“Ask Claire to show you my letters! Ask another woman, a religious woman, who will soon call me ‘daughter,’ whose cell I see almost daily with longing! Ask her if, at certain times, I did not wish to close to you that door which I shall close to-morrow!”

“Never!” exclaimed Paul, clasping in his arms the woman he had loved so long. “Come, my darling, my wife. Let us forget this terrible evening. The clouds will pass away. Life is before us. We shall be happy, you shall see!”

Nadia, as if lulled to sleep, did not resist his embrace. "Ah, you are noble!" said she. "To-morrow I will try to do penance for having loved you. To-day I can not. You give me the adieux I want. Yes, my Paul, I want them this minute! But you see that all is ended. I am in your arms; I have my head upon your dear shoulder; I feel your tears upon my cheek; and I say to you, No!" She remained thus, wrapped in a reverie, reviewing in her mind the last five years, from a certain night in a railroad carriage up to her conversation with little Martha by the fireside, where the brands still burned. She compared the joys experienced with the tortures, and taken altogether, she would not have lived her life over again.

"Now," she sighed, disengaging herself gently, "it is time to finish our last evening. How many times, on hearing the heavy door of my house close upon you, on listening to your footsteps dying away in the night, how many times have I said: 'My God, may nothing happen to my beloved on his way!' This evening, my friend, I am not uneasy about you. You have Claire."

"Oh!" moaned Paul. "It seems as if I were at your death-bed!"

"Very far from that. You are taking leave of a poor weary woman, who is going to rest now. My friend! my dear Paul! listen to me now. Do not leave me with the belief that I have sacrificed myself for you. I know of what your devotion is capable, but it would not have made amends for what has

been. I swear to you this shall be the last unkind word you will hear from Nadia. I swear that you could not have made me as happy as I am going to be."

They separated. Once again, the closing of the heavy door shook the room. Once again, from behind her curtain, Nadia watched Paul de Chérancy disappear. She had the last and cruel happiness of seeing him depart slowly, his handkerchief to his eyes, weeping bitter tears.

* * * * *

In a small but charming villa situated in a wild corner on the shores of the Dordagne between Bergerac and Lalinde, new tenants settled quietly one spring. The Chérancys spent two-thirds of the year in that pretty nook. The Salon called them to Paris during the months of April and of May, for the artist was more than ever faithful to his art. Autumn belonged to La Prée.

The old Chalonnès received with open arms, not only their grandchild, Marthe, the future mistress of the place, but also the latter's tiny brother, the counterpart of his mother.

During the trips to Paris, Marthe visited several times a week "Mother Claire-Marie-Pauline," whom she always called "Aunt Nadia." Mlle. de Chalonne had grown a great deal, for her mother would not hear her second marriage spoken of until her cousin's final vows were taken.

She seemed, too, to wish to make amends for lost time. Those who once had considered her cold

would scarcely have known her. For she made amends in the proud happiness of her passion, for the long years which had passed without love, for the months during which she had to conceal her love.

Paul de Chérancy often escorted "his sister-in-law" to the convent. His short interviews with the nun neither embarrassed nor made them sad, for Nadia was as godly as well as a happy woman.

Of all the personages in this story, *Bramatuero* alone regretted the past. He missed the snows of the long winters at Panticosa, the too relaxing climate of La Prée did not agree with his mountaineer's lungs. Old, surly, languid, less petted, the poor animal discovered, as do so many human beings, that the happiness of some here below is made up of the unhappiness of others.

THE END.

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